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NOVEMBER 1994

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by DeLoris
Stanton Forbes

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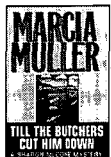
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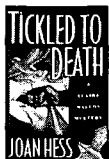
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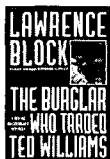
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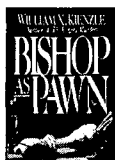
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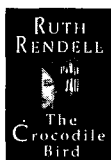
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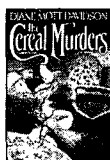
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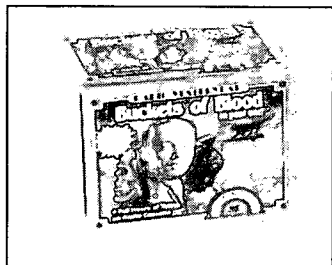
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Halloween approaches, as is its wont at this time of year. We did say approaches; we know it isn't exactly upon us, that some of you, in fact, have yet to fire up the barbecue for Labor Day.

Nonetheless, we try to add to the November issue's mix a special nod to the Otherworldly, and to that end you will find here one ghost, two mummies, and one Fury (we suspect it's Alecto).

The latter turns up in Oswald's Couldrey's "The Mistaken Fury," our Mystery Classic. The story appeared in *The Mistaken Fury and Other Lapses*, published by Blackwell in 1914; it was collected by Dorothy L. Sayers in *The Third Omnibus of Crime*, Blue Ribbon Books, 1935.

The mummies make their appearance in our cover story, DeLoris Stanton Forbes's "Vacancy at Cubana's Hotel." Ms. Forbes, who also writes under the names Stanton Forbes and Tobias Wells, is the author of many novels and short stories; of the latter, a number appeared in AHMM from 1957 to 1968. She has been nominated for an Edgar (for *Grieve for the Past*, 1963) and has been frequently reprinted by the Detective Book Club and by numerous foreign publishers; her AHMM short story "My Sister Annabelle" (1962) was reprinted in Allen J. Hubin's *Best of the Best Detective Stories/25th Anniversary Collection* (Dutton, 1971).

We won't tell you where the ghost comes in.

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Fun and Games at the Whacks Museum and Other Horror Stories

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EDITED BY
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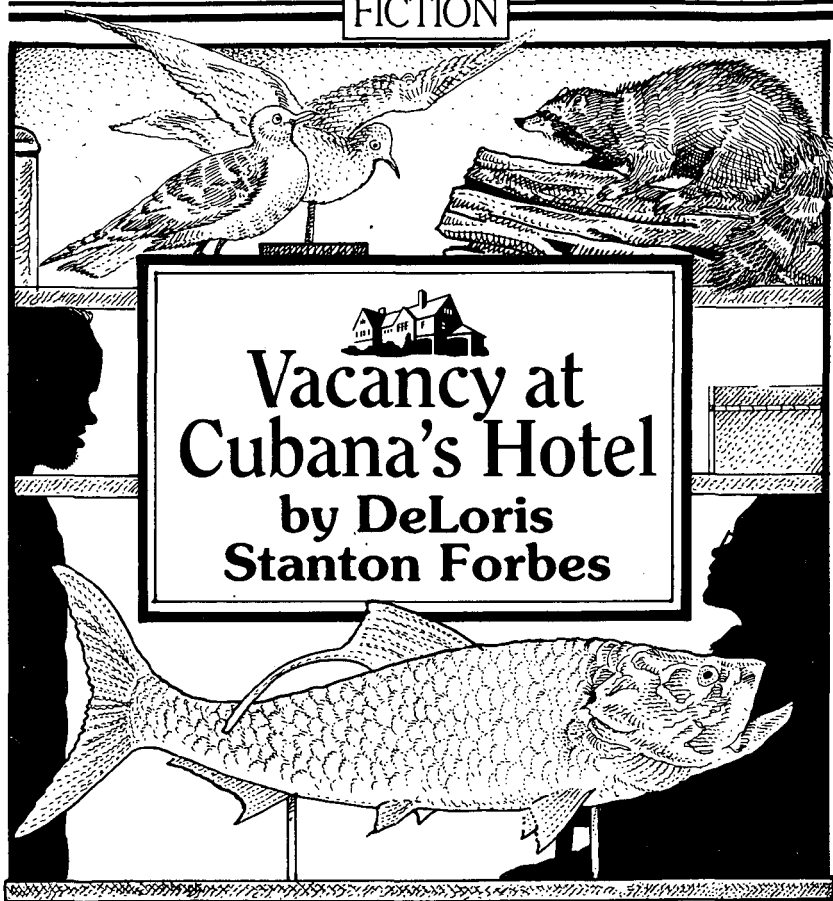
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FICTION



She ran her business from her wheelchair.

Oh, she could walk all right. Not without some effort, she was a little gimpy, but she could get around. Only thing was, the wheelchair saved time, saved energy, and brought out the sympathy vote.

Her business was named after her, her father had done that. CUBANA'S HOTEL AND MUSEUM read the sign. In smaller letters, now faded, almost illegible, TAXIDERMIST. And then, beneath that in ornate script, *Tourists more than welcome but catering to the business trav-*

eler. Make us your home away from home. Special rates for drummers.

Only they didn't call them drummers any more, not in a long, long time. Traveling salesmen . . . did you hear the story about the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter? And then, maybe because of all those jokes, just travelers or salesmen and finally just hey, you, mister. They did their business from computers now, a lot of them, so there weren't so many who came to stay at Cubana's Hotel (and Museum) any more; in fact there were hardly any at all. A couple of "permanent guests" gave her a little cash flow—Old Man Ferguson, whose daughter had kicked him out for being a bad influence on her kids (he chewed tobacco, had a spittoon in his room), and Ralph Sennett Jones, the Third, who was the only town-grown lawyer who still lived right in Stateville, had lived here all his sixty-some years of life, most of the time in the family home on Park Avenue (Stateville's fanciest street) until his mother died in 1980 and then he'd moved into Cubana's Hotel. He fancied clean linen every day, paid extra for it.

Old Man Ferguson had the first room on the right when you went in the front door,

Ralph Sennett Jones the Third chose the last room on the left closest to the rear door. Cubana's Hotel was built like two shoeboxes stacked on top of one another, six rooms each side each floor, twenty-four rooms in all; the museum was a separate one story concrete block building out back. Cubana used two of the twenty-four rooms, made them into a kind of apartment after her father passed on. He'd insisted on staying in the up-front left where he could see everybody and everything who came and went. After Cubana tried that for awhile, only to find she was pestered to death, she made up-front left into an office and moved back, across from Ralph Sennett Jones the Third. It was quieter back there, but the public could still reach her quickly if and when she wanted them to.

And besides, the palm tree was out back. Next to the museum. She could see it from her bed when she looked out. She'd helped her daddy plant that palm tree when he bought the hotel. It had been a long time growing up (just as she had), but now it was a real royal palm waving up there in the breeze when they had a breeze and she liked to look at it from her bed. Daddy's classic Caddy (pale blue, with fins, 1955) was parked under the palm tree,

the car and the tree, they brought back other days.

Some women had tried to move into the hotel because her rates were low, but Cubana told them (Josephine Albani was one, and Karen Kaye Sohn was another) that she didn't rent to ladies permanently, only as transients. She used the old excuse about how they would be wanting their own washer and dryer or at least a clothesline and how they used too much hot water always washing their hair, but the truth of the matter was that she knew damn well they'd be having gentlemen callers even though Josephine was squinty-eyed and at least fifty and Karen Kaye was what you'd kindly call heavyset. It had been her experience that it didn't matter much what a woman looked like, sooner or later they'd have gentlemen callers because men were like that. Not very choosy.

Used to be, when Daddy bought the hotel, that it was located right smack on 1-A, which was the main road, but then they built I-95 and that siphoned off the through traffic like a big old thirsty gas thief sucking it up through a hose so that only those looking for cheap or closer to the ocean but not so close as to be expensive, that was the kind of transient

she got these days. Pains in the you-know-what for the most part, but Daddy had taught her that dealing with the public was hard but remember, it was dealing with the public that put biscuits on the table and beer in the refrig so she put up with the public.

Such as the fella she'd checked in night before last. In the middle of a thunderstorm, her lights were out, another power outage, and she was using kerosene lanterns and candles, so she couldn't see him too well even if she was wearing her contacts which she wasn't, and he probably couldn't see her much better, but he signed his name and paid up front so she took him in even though there was something about him that gave her pause. Maybe it was because he was sopping wet or maybe it was because in the storm everything looked like an old black and white movie, but there was something about him that caused her to put him up on the second floor. All by himself. Mr. Stanley Smith of Atlanta, Georgia, that's what he'd written. Driving a rental car, she knew it was a rental 'cause he'd had to pull out the key to read the license plate number. With one suitcase. Not really a suitcase, more like one of those cloth duffel bags. Wet as water just as

he was. She gave him a couple of extra towels. Out of the kindness of her heart.

She hadn't laid eyes on him since.

She got to worrying about that. Maybe Stanley Smith was sick or something, lying up there unable to reach help. Or—even worse—maybe he'd had a heart attack and died just like Daddy did, she'd found her father all cold and stiff and his eyes had been wide open with this look that said it's all your fault, Cubana, I told you that guy was no good.

So she parked the wheelchair at the foot of the stairs and went up. She sneezed when she got to the top, dusty up there, Celeste hadn't run the vacuum in this hall in a coon's age, that was sure. She'd give Celeste a good talking to when she came in tomorrow, much good that would do. She could threaten to fire her, but both she and Celeste knew that was just so much talk because who else could she get to clean the place for what she paid?

The stairs had taken some of her breath, so she rested for a minute, listened. Not a sound. God, she hoped the man wasn't lying in there like some kind of catfish belly up out of water. She went to the door of Room 18 and knocked, heart thumping in her ears like a banjo with

a busted string. "Mr. Smith? You all right?"

Silence. She put her ear to the panel, her hand on the knob. The door was locked, she'd have to go back down and get her master key if she could remember where she put it. She rapped again, louder. "Mr. Smith!"

She heard something. A slither. Like a big old snake moving across a sheet. "Mr. Smith! Are you all right?"

"Who's there? What do you want?" He sounded far away, and his words were slurred. Drunk, she thought. He's drunk as a skunk. Or hungover like a sweaty T-shirt on a balcony railing.

"Are you all right? You've been up here for two days. I was worried . . ."

The door opened with a jerk, she hadn't been expecting it, she nearly fell into the room. He stood there dressed only in his jockey shorts, his face covered with a two-day stubble, his pale eyes bloodshot. He said, "Hey there, Cubana. Didn't recognize me when I came in, did ya?"

She swallowed hard. "Hello, Clovis. Which dark cloud did you drop out of?"

"You don't look very happy to see me. I'd a thought you'd be happy as hell to have your old man back. And here you

didn't even know it was me. That's a fine how-de-do." He swiped his hand across his mouth, worked his tongue. "I'm dry as a chip. Got anything drinkable in this dump? A fella needs a get-going nip in the morning, you know that, Cubana. Your old man must have something, he always did have something stashed away. How's the old bastard anyway? Still a Clovis-hater from the word go?"

Her mouth was dry, too. "Daddy's dead. I don't have any spirits in this place, I'm born again. You'll have to take your thirst elsewhere, Clóvis. Matter of fact, you'll have to take your whole self elsewhere. Like the Bible says, there's no room at this inn."

He grinned then. His teeth were stained as though he'd been slack in brushing. "Ah, you don't mean that, Honey Babe. Remember when I used to call you that. How 'bout now, Honey Babe. I got the time. I got plenty of time. A whole lifetime ahead of me. To spend with you."

She had the door open behind her, she took a step out of it. "Go, I said. Or I'll call the cops."

Clovis laughed. "My old buddy Tank Beaver still sheriff? Funniest sight I ever saw in my life was him running for a touchdown back in high

school, running like the hounds of hell was after him." He snickered. "The wrong way." He sobered. "I'd like to oblige you, Honey Babe, but I just can't leave your ever-lovin' side."

"Of course you can. You stuff your junk in that duffel bag, you can leave the empty bottles, and put one foot in front of the other, that's all it takes." She was out in the hall now, it had been some time since she'd been able to move so quickly.

But he moved faster. Barring her way, he said, "Aw, you're still holding that little misfortune we had way back when against me. You know I didn't mean it to happen, Honey Babe. You know how I am when I'm loaded. Well, sometimes when I'm not loaded. I couldn't let those Georgia troopers haul me in for DUI, they'd run my name through Florida records and throw the book at me, and I figured any kind of Georgia jail was hell, which it surely was only I found that out later, and I could tell you weren't dead only mashed up some and I figured your old man would take care of you." He reached for her hand, she backed away, he grinned like a big-eyed collie but his heart wasn't in it, and that sign of insecurity pleased her a little till she figured it meant only that

he wanted something. He wiped the smile off, tried for a bad little boy look. "Aw, hell, I don't blame you, I sure as hell hightailed it, didn't I?"

She stepped around him. "See, you do know how to ske-daddle. So do it again. Remember the time I backed you off with a shotgun I didn't even know how to shoot? Well, I still got that shotgun. And I've learned how to use it."

But now he was in the way once more. We're doing some kind of new dance, she thought. I go this way, he goes that, where's the music?

"Like I said, I can't. You see, this is my address from now on. My parole officer expects to find me here. And this is where I'm gonna be."

"Parole officer?" She turned her face away, there was something frightening in his eyes, his eyes were different. In the old days he'd just looked like a dumb but pretty blue-eyed boar pig ready to charge; now he looked—like one of those actors in one of those TV shows where a madman breaks into the house looking for this woman and . . . "So they finally caught up with you. I'm not surprised. What were you in for?"

"This and that."

"This and that what?" She thought of the worst. "Did you kill somebody?"

"It don't matter. I served my time. And a long time it was, too. But the prisons are getting crowded, you heard that, have you? And my time was almost up, so they let me out." He grabbed her shoulders, leered into her face, the real Clovis Burris. His breath was bad. "I'm a nice boy now, see? That's what they figure. I've been rehabilitated, hallelujah! Since you're such a good Christian, you can take me to church with you, you can tell 'em, see, I brought me a sinner. A bona fide black-hearted sinner. A repentant sinner, praise the Lord!"

She pulled away. "You bastard. I'm callin' the cops. Now." And she trotted down the hall, expecting him to be coming after, but all he did was stand there and hee-ho-haw, she could hear him laughing all the way down the stairs.

Deputy Sheriff Elroy Jefferson looked like a pinup poster or a model on a policeman-of-the-month calendar. He was somewhere in his early thirties, she figured, handsome as hell and sure of himself, you bet. At least where the ladies were concerned, that was the word around town. He prowled the hallway like an athlete in training, his hound-dog-jowled sheriff puffing along behind. She sat waiting in her wheel-

chair, she'd make certain that one Clovis Burris would be hightailing down those stairs any minute now. Or else.

"Mornin', Cubana," huffed Sheriff Beaver.

"He's upstairs," she told him. "In 18."

"So the old boy finally turned up," the sheriff watched his deputy climb two steps at a time. His expression was hard to read; the way Cubana saw it, he either envied Elroy or despised him, probably a little of both. "I'm kinda surprised you'd take him back after that mess up in Georgia. As I recall, your daddy had to bring you home in an ambulance. . . . Course, like they say, time heals all wounds. Or does the saying go, time wounds all heels?" He tittered, a wheezy laugh sounding like water boiling too fast on the stove.

Ralph Sennett Jones the Third picked that moment to emerge from his room. "Sheriff?" he said, punctuating the word with a question mark. "Miz Rogers?"

"No problem, Mr. Jones," Cubana told him. "The sheriff is just going up to do a little insect exterminating."

Tank Beaver snorted and made his way up the stairs. Ralph Sennett Jones the Third waggled his eyebrows, went on his way. For a man of the law,

he was a man of few words, Cubana figured that was why he was short on clients. Come on, sheriff, do your duty, she urged silently. I want to see Clovis Burris come down those stairs with his tail between his legs

... But he didn't come and they didn't come for five, ten, fifteen, more minutes and she was about to get out of her chair and climb those stairs again when she finally heard footsteps so she settled back to let the icicles that had been growing around her heart muscle melt. Looking expectantly upward, she saw Deputy Sheriff Jefferson, Sheriff Beaver, and . . . nobody.

"He says he's still your husband." The sheriff was frowning. "You ever get a divorce from Clovis Burris, Cubana?"

She swallowed, shook her head. "I figured he was dead. Besides, what does it matter? This is my property, my daddy left it to me, not him, and I want him out of here."

"Well, I tell you, ma'am, it looks like a purely domestic matter to me. Has he done anything to you, committed battery, assault of any kind?"

"Says he just got hisself released from a work detail up in Starke." Deputy Jefferson was chewing on a toothpick, he talked around it. "Says he was

paroled to your custody, Miz Burris."

"I am not Mrs. Burris . . ."

"So I don't figure I can pick him up on any charges if he's minding his manners . . ." The sheriff had his back halfway turned to her already, one foot ready to take him out the door, in a hurry to go—somewhere important, hah!

"He's hungover. He's been drinking. Isn't that a violation of parole?"

A big-eyed, puffy-eyed glance over a fat, round shoulder. "Well now, I reckon what a man does in the privacy of his bedroom on his first night home is kind of hard to judge harshly, wouldn't you say so? 'Specially if he isn't botherin' anybody. 'Course, I can call his parole officer and tell him what you're tellin' me if that's what you want me to do . . ." She was about to say, "That's what I want you to do," when he finished his sentence, "... but I figure his parole officer is a busy man like most parole officers and he's just gonna wink an eye and your husband is going to feel just a little bit put out with his better half . . ."

Her daddy had been a dispenser of what he called pearls of wisdom. One of his pearls was, "It's a man's world out there, Cubana. A woman's gotta be twice as smart as the

smartest man just to get by." She couldn't swear that she was even half as smart as the smartest man, but she sure as heck was smarter than Tank Beaver and his handsome deputy. She lowered her eyelids and looked piously down at her folded hands.

"Thanks anyway," she told the law. "I'll let you know when he murders me."

Celeste came in the back door while they were going out the front, wanted to know what the heck was the sheriff doing there. "Has Old Man Ferguson kicked the bucket?" Cubana told her no, how come she was late again, and how come she hadn't dusted upstairs, and no, don't do it now, get going on Ralph Sennett Jones the Third's room and she, Cubana'd be out in the museum if anybody wanted her.

The local attractions sign at the city limits informed passersby that the Stateville Museum located at Cubana's Hotel was open six days a week from ten until four, and since another of Daddy's laws was if you give your word, stick to it, Cubana rolled her chair out to the museum at five minutes to ten and unbolted the heavy door.

Inside, she sneezed again, damn that Celeste, and turned on the lights, switched on the air conditioner, set it on high.

Soon as it cooled off in there, she'd turn it down, electricity cost a bundle these days and the museum didn't attract that many curious visitors, never had once she'd taken the sign down that read SEE THE MUMMIES! SEE THE REAL FLORIDA MUMMIES! PRESERVED FOR PERPETUITY! VICTIMS OF AN UNKNOWN KILLER! SEE THE MUMMIES! Daddy had paid to have that sign painted by a professional sign painter (the same sign painter who'd done the fancy script on the sign outside, a traveling sign painter, Daddy paid him with free room and board) because Daddy believed that doing things like signs on the cheap was tacky.

Cubana believed that any kind of sign that said SEE THE MUMMIES was tacky, so one of the first things she did after Daddy died was get rid of the sign. Sometimes now, though, she kind of wished she'd kept it. The whole world had gone tacky so far as she could tell.

She paid her usual courtesy call on Harlan and Eloise. Nobody knew what their real names were, they'd turned up in the late 1880's among the effects of one "Doctor" Aloysius Parkinson, who'd driven into town in a horse and wagon in the middle of one dark night and dropped dead. The mummies were inside the wagon,

carefully wrapped in muslin sheets (all of this information came from Daddy, who got it from his daddy, who was an eyewitness to all the excitement), and the local undertaker claimed them for his fee in burying "Doctor" Aloysius Parkinson, who had no sign of money nor kin.

Daddy, with an eye for the off chance, had purchased the mummies to start his museum in conjunction with his hotel and his taxidermy business, and Cubana had named the pair because nobody else had seen fit to do it.

Daddy also bought from Undertaker DelRio ("The man is of Puerto Rican extraction, I do believe, but they tell me he does a worthy job," said Daddy) two big old white oversized coffins that had been sitting around his funeral parlor long enough to turn ivory-colored, and these had been the resting places of Harlan and Eloise since the museum opened.

Back when Cubana was young and lonely, she would come in when nobody was around and talk to Harlan and Eloise. They'd been married, she believed, they died holding hands in a dreadful epidemic, died happy, since if they had to go at least they would go together. They'd had a little girl who'd disappeared, she was the

cause of considerable anxiety even in their present state because they didn't know whether she was dead or alive. For some time Cubana pretended that she was that little girl, she thought it seemed to give them peace and besides, when she was little, she'd known sure as shootin' (Daddy's favorite expression had been sure as shootin') that she was somebody else from some other place.

That was when she was little.

Harlan and Eloise had wisps of hair (and toenails), but it was hard to tell what they'd looked like, whether they'd been blonds or brunettes, whether they'd been tall or short, because over the years they'd shrunk until they were just about the size of big dolls. Heck, she could fit another body into one of those big coffins and stick Harlan or Eloise in at the top and nobody would

... There was a feather duster back in the closet. She got it out and swished it around, had a thought that maybe what the place needed was a little music, soft music, churchy music maybe, "Nearer My God to Thee," something like that, she could get some speakers rigged up so it would play outside,

maybe that would attract some . . .

"Jeezus, this place looks just the same as it did twenty years back, you still got those old skeletons for show, I guess you do." Clovis had gotten himself dressed in jeans and boots and a T-shirt that showed a Confederate soldier and his hoop-skirted girl looking goo-goo eyed at one another. Cubana took a good grip on the feather duster handle, if nothing else she could set him up with a dust allergy and a sneezing spell, she'd almost forgotten how much she hated him.

"This place take in much money?" Clovis looked around. "Don't look so. Guess you need to spice it up some. That big tarpon looks like somebody made it up, and those old stuffed seagulls up there don't exactly turn a fella on, and a dead raccoon standing on a piece of driftwood just don't cut the mustard if you know what I mean. Too bad your old man didn't use his taxidermy to do something special—there's a joke about an old babe that brought in two dead monkeys, she wanted them stuffed 'cause they were her pets, have you heard it? The taxidermist says do you want them mounted, lady, and she says no, just shaking hands. That's the kind of exhibit that'll bring in the

customers. Animals mounted." He laughed, she thought fleetingly of pouring cyanide into a bottle of the cheapest ABC bourbon, she could almost smell the liquor. "I'll put my mind to it, guess I'll have to pitch in and give you a hand, Honey Babe. Seeing's as how all this must be yours. And what's yours is mine as the saying goes."

"I don't need your hand, I don't need any part of you, and I've got me a lawyer. Soon as I can get a divorce, you're going to be long gone. Until then, back off." She wheeled back toward the ticket desk, slipped behind it, pulled out a drawer. From the drawer she took her daddy's .38, always keep some protection handy, Cubana, there are a lot of bastards out there showing their shark teeth, Daddy had said. She'd never even picked it up in the years since he'd gone, she didn't even know for sure if it was loaded but it looked loaded, it looked deadly.

Clovis blinked, thought, faked a smile, put his hands up in mock supplication. "It's just the shock of seeing the love of your life again," he said, showing his grungy teeth. "Tell you what, we'll go slow and easy. Get to know each other again. Sorry I was coming on too

strong, it's just that I've missed you so much . . ."

She waved the gun.

"Okay, I'm going, I'm going. Going to look around the town, see if I can find anybody I know. I'll be back at lunchtime, Honey Babe. I'll be back . . ."

Her gun arm stretched; he turned. On the back of the T-shirt the Confederate officer had his hand under the raised hoopskirt. It figured, thought Cubana, like they say in the clothing store, it's you, Clovis Burris, it's you.

She watched from the doorway. When he'd vanished from sight, she turned off the air conditioner, locked the museum, and went back to her rooms. She'd brought the pistol, she tossed it into her tote bag, wrote a note. Dear Ralph Sennett Jones the Third, she wrote, I want a quick divorce from Clovis Burris. Tell me what I've got to do. And she signed it, pushed it under Ralph Sennett Jones the Third's door, looked to see where Celeste had got to, found her wasting time as usual, and sent her in the direction of Old Man Ferguson. Then, car keys in hand, she went out to the Cadillac, got in, and drove off to see Jimmy John.

When she got back, she cooked country ham and biscuits, made gravy, had it all

ready when Clovis showed up. He was carrying a bucket of cold fried chicken from Kentucky Fried. "Thanks," she said, "but I got lunch all ready," and his eyes lit up and he shoveled it in and she thought that's one way she could do it, she could poison him.

Trouble was, she'd get caught, even dimwitted Tank Beaver could figure that out.

She'd have to be smarter than that.

Maybe it wasn't a matter of how he died. Maybe it was a matter of what happened to him after.

If she had a way of disposing of the body, it wouldn't matter how he died, would it? She could say he just wandered off again, nobody'd care.

Disposing of bodies. They got buried but often found. Not good. They got dropped in the ocean, but they usually washed up somewhere. Not ideal. What else did you do with a body? Cut it up and put it in your freezer? She'd read of that, but she'd read of it because the killer got caught. She couldn't take a chance, not even an off chance, because of Jimmy John. If anything happened to her, what would happen to him? She hated to even think about it.

Too bad she couldn't stuff Clovis and put him in the museum.

Too bad she couldn't.

She couldn't?

Think about it, Cubana. Give it some thought.

Meanwhile, she'd play nice—nice and hard to get. Like Daddy'd said, you don't catch crappie with sour lemon rind.

Down at the library ("Cubana, what in the world...?") She had to admit that Karen Kaye Sohn had a right to express surprise, Cubana couldn't remember the last time she'd set foot in the library, high school probably) she looked up taxidermy in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, found two whole pages in small print, learned more than she wanted to know. Mostly she learned that you had to skin whatever it was you were preserving, and she sure as heck didn't want to skin Clovis Burris even if—God knew—he deserved it. So, as far as she was concerned, taxidermy was out.

On her way out, Karen Kaye swung her big butt off the stool behind the check-out counter to follow her to the door. "I hear that your husband showed up after all these years, just imagine that. Clovis still handsome as ever?"

"A Greek god," said Cubana. "He's just visiting. Like they say, passing through."

Karen Kaye made a "that's too bad" face. "I guess he came to see Jimmy John."

Cubana felt a sharp stab in her heart, identified it as fear. "No," she said. "And I don't want him to." She read something in Karen Kaye's expression that she didn't care for at all. "I'd just as soon nobody mentioned Jimmy John to Clovis," she said. "There's not too many who know about him, and Clovis isn't one of them."

Karen Kaye smiled. "Whatever you say, darlin'."

Cubana started out, came back. "Karen Kaye."

"Hmmm?"

"You still interested in a room in the hotel?"

Karen Kaye sashayed just a bit, reminded Cubana of a big yacht that had pulled into the marina last week, the captain'd had trouble getting its aft around. "Might be. If the price was right."

"Why don't you stop by when you get a chance? We'll talk about it."

"Well, sure. When I get a chance. 'Course, I'm pretty comfortable where I am now."

"Well. If you're interested. If you get a chance."

A woman Cubana didn't know came into the library then with three little kids in tow, Karen Kaye said, "See you, darlin'," and wallowed in their wake, and that's where they left it. Another mark against Clovis Burris, Cubana

told the Cadillac. What am I going to do? Sooner or later he'll hear about Jimmy John and

The Cadillac, coming to life at the turn of the ignition key, said doitssoon, doitssoon, doitssoooooooooon.

So she did.

Like Daddy'd said, sometimes you gotta throw caution to the hurricane. And like Daddy'd said, don't get all tied up in complications, keep it simple. Whatever you do, keep it simple.

Ralph Sennett Jones the Third wanted to know if Clovis would sign the divorce papers and she said sure and forged his name. Old Man Ferguson died in his sleep and left Celeste five thousand dollars in his will for "taking care of my spittoon." His family was furious, seeing that five thousand dollars was just about everything that Old Man Ferguson had to leave in a will.

After that Celeste got more uppity than ever, so Cubana fired her and hired a young Haitian woman who worked like a well-trained dog and never argued mostly because she didn't speak the language.

Karen Kaye came around to talk about a room, and Cubana told her sorry, she'd changed her mind.

Sheriff Tank Beaver came around with Deputy Jefferson in tow. "Ain't laid eyes on Clovis for awhile now, Cubana," said the sheriff, pretending to be casual. "He sick or something?"

"Oh, he's gone, sheriff, didn't he tell you he was leaving? Soon as his parole officer looked the other way. After I gave him plane fare. Said he was bound for Las Vegas, had a friend there who'd been rodeoing, offered Clovis a job. Gosh, I'd say he left maybe a couple of weeks ago. Hi there, Elroy, congratulations on your recent marriage. You got yourself one pretty girl in the sheriff's daughter. Congratulations to you, too, Frank. Now you won't have to worry about Lolita any more."

The sheriff squinted. When he squinted, he looked mean. "Her name's Lola, not Lolita. I had a call from that parole officer, said he hadn't heard from old Clovis since last month. You got an address in Las Vegas?"

Cubana smiled. "Haven't heard a word. You know Clovis. I'll hear from him when he wants something. Well, I got to go open the museum now, sheriff. Business has been picking up lately since they started building that new baseball complex west of town. I heard

all the activity's brought in some bad actors, too, bank heists, car jackings, big city stuff. Guess you've got your hands full these days, sheriff. That, as they say, is the price of progress."

She could feel their eyes on her back as she walked out past the palm tree and the Cadillac, unlocked the museum door. She turned on the lights inside, had no need to turn on the air conditioner, she kept it running these days. Best way to keep odors from building up in a closed building, circulate the air. She walked over to the cashiers, said, "Hi there, Harlan. Hi there, Eloise. Hi, there, Clovis. Everybody cosy? Another day, another dollar like my daddy used to say."

Only Jimmy John knew how she'd done it. She'd told him everything, how she'd figured it wouldn't be a good idea to go out and buy anything lethal (keep it simple) so she'd poked around in Daddy's old taxi-dermy equipment and found bottles with indistinct labels and unknown liquids but bearing skull-and-crossbone warnings. She'd mixed some of each—taking care, in high school chemistry Charlie Reynolds had put a hole in the chem lab's ceiling with one of his concoctions, now he was a pharmacist with his own chain of drug-

stores—then poured the mess into a gallon bottle of Quint Door's red Chianti wine (Clovis had been overly fond of Quint's jug red, made fresh each week in Quint's garage in the old days), let it settle, and then let nature take its course.

Nature's course was taken during the time when Celeste was gone and before Marie had come, so Clovis just lay upstairs in number 18 where nobody would bother him and granted he smelled to high heaven if you went up there but downstairs it wasn't so bad, it couldn't have been because Ralph Sennett Jones the Third didn't even notice but then she'd used a lot of air spray (an awful lot) and little by little the stench died away.

Then one night she brought him down, put him in her wheelchair, and took him out to the museum. He'd dried out a good deal, was turning to something like skin and bones (nature's taxidermy, she thought), and she'd built up her shoulder muscles maneuvering that chair so it wasn't half as much trouble as she'd thought it would be and when she crammed Clovis into the bottom half of Eloise's oversized coffin (Eloise being two and a half inches shorter than Harlan, Cubana'd measured), Clovis fitted almost perfectly. Al-

most, because she'd had to bend his knees up so that Eloise wasn't crowded (Cubana figured Eloise had squatter's rights). The result was that not a single bit of Clovis could be seen. Even if you looked close. Real close. Just for a good measure, a piece of old lace ruffle provided double insurance. Looked like Eloise was wearing a fancy gown.

She looked down at her blue-eyed, baby-faced son and smiled. "Maybe one day I'll take you to see your daddy, Jimmy John. Would you like that? One day when you get all better?"

But she knew, even as she spoke, that her slack-faced man child lying there in the iron-sided bed wasn't going to get all better, never ever. It was her fault when you got right down to it, she hadn't been able to protect him all those years ago when he was still in the womb and his drunken father had sent her and her baby and the pickup he was driving into a semi-trailer truck on Route 95 up in Georgia and she'd gone flying through the sprung-open door clear across the highway and he'd run off and left her there to die . . .

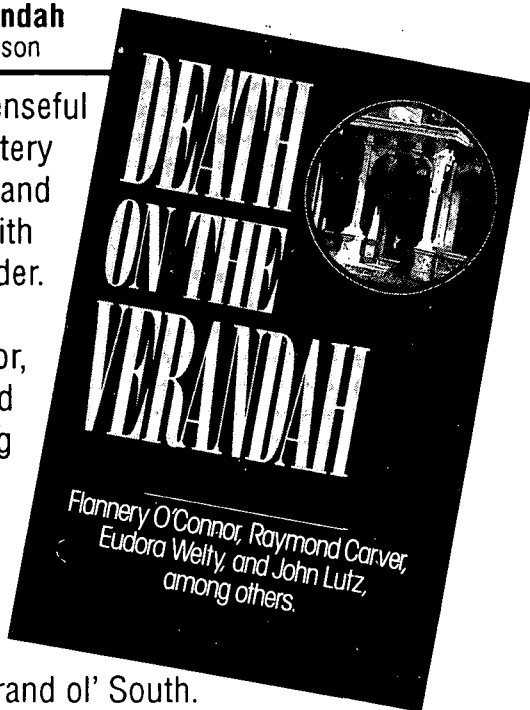
But she couldn't tell Jimmy John that part. It wouldn't do for a boy to hate his daddy. It wouldn't do at all.

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FICTION

WAITING

by Esther J. Holt



Illustration by Andrea Van Voorst Van Beest

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I'm sitting here in my study barely focusing on the fake fireplace Joni bought from Sears to remind me that she'd wanted real fireplaces included in the house we built shortly after we were married. There wasn't enough money. Joni's family owns a big department store. I just work there.

I'm waiting and wishing I could be somewhere else, anywhere that would keep me from facing Temple McPherson. Never, until now, have I not wanted to see him and share in his flamboyant excitement. In better days he made me forget the staid individual I've become.

We were waiting that day, too, only I didn't know it. Temp often calls me to get myself over to his office at his new-car dealership. There is yet another idea for a project he wants to bounce off me. He always has a number of projects going at once, the kinds of things that might start out in junk catalogues and end in discount department stores. Next, he'll be showing up on TV with one of these infomercials.

He must make money on them. He slaps the stack of computer printouts covered with figures and roars, "After me and Momma, after Aunt Carrie, this money is all yours!"

I didn't remember his Aunt Carrie, but he said she'd been to the house on Eusted Street many a time. I guess we were too busy with our own shenanigans to notice.

When we all lived in that neighborhood, there were six of us boys barreling around together. Mostly, we wound up in the McPhersons' yard, it being the largest and at the end of the street where the woods began. Later, when we'd all grown up and found our own way, we had to bury Harve, who'd gone off to be a city policeman, and Dal, whose eyes had gleamed with the dream of being a soldier of fortune. Rob and Tully both lived in distant cities. They seldom came home now that both sets of parents had moved to Florida. Rob had become a high school science teacher in New Mexico. Tully said about himself only that he did "this 'n' that."

Whatever "this 'n' that" was, it was lucrative and involved traveling. He'd been to more places than Joni had brochures for.

I stayed because I married Joni Clayton and a job in her family's department store. Temple stayed because his parents wouldn't go anywhere they would be strangers, and Temple would never leave them.

That day he'd telephoned me at the store to come *now*, listen to a new idea before it got cold. So I sat there while he did a light step around his office describing the decorative metal panels and... Fire sirens in the distance stopped him in mid-stride, looking exactly like Merlin Olsen in his heyday describing a brilliant move he'd made on the gridiron. When the trucks didn't come near, Temple returned to the subject at hand. It was a dry spring, and grass fires were common.

It wasn't until Chief of Police Nate Jackson came walking in, looking as gray as his hair, that Temp stopped. His big hands were held out, measuring a size of the metal panels he thought would sell. He heard the chief out.

His hands came down, then went back up, and I froze. A man his size, if he went berserk, everything in the office, including the chief and me, would be in a heap on the floor. I could hear the chief take in a deep breath and hold it. From the tightness in my chest, I knew I'd done the same. If Temp couldn't hear us breathing, he couldn't home in on us.

Where it came from I don't know, but I had a sudden flash on the first watch Temp ever bought for himself. It was an expensive novelty back then, a

battery-powered thing with all kinds of information on it, the time, the date, a compass. He'd had it just three months when the watch quit on him. The two of us were in his room just hanging around. When he looked at it, and no time had passed, his fists went toward the ceiling and out came a fierce, throat-tearing growl of frustration. The hair on my neck stood on end.

"Tem-pull," came gently from just outside his door.

"Sorry, Momma." The hands came down, and Temple looked guilty. No one ever raised his voice in that house.

Momma wasn't present this time to put a lid on his emotions. I glanced toward the heavy desk in the corner. Was there room under it for the chief and me both, or would we have to fight each other for it?

It was something of a let-down when Temp took one long stride toward the wall. Both big fists went through the paneling. Never a sound came from his mouth, and that was worse than a scream. I sidled over and lifted his hands out of the wreckage. He didn't seem to feel all the scratches.

"Come on, Temp. Come sit down." I led him to his chair where he sank down as if he'd never get up again. His big head came hard against me.

My paternal instincts made me wrap my arms around it. My own pain at losing Mrs. McPherson was so bad I couldn't even imagine his.

The lady, small-boned and hardly four inches above five feet, who came unobtrusively to set plates of cookies and pitchers of Kool-Aid on the back porch, was gone. She'd never raised her voice, but Temple always knew when she meant business.

It took me a long time to catch on. That little woman had more hand signals than a baseball manager. I marveled at her skill in controlling a boy who grew big enough to tuck her under his arm and run down a football field with her. His father would have fittted under the other arm. Where *did* those small people get that big son? People wondered.

"I'm surely glad Daddy died two years ago, or I'd have both of them laid out at Marsh's." His big head moved against me.

"Come on, Temp. I'll take you home." I stood back, giving him room to stand up.

"I wanna go look," he said childishly.

"Not today. I'll take you home to Joni." My wife always knew what to do at times like those. I never did.

Temple didn't have a wife to look after him. With his mother gone, he had no one but his friends, some of whom would forget after a few days that he might need them. I wondered what Mrs. McPherson had been doing, what part of the house she was in.

I kept thinking there should have been some warning. When Temp heard the sirens, he should have felt a sudden stab or something, anything that would tell him of the passing of his mother. Or he should have felt it before, at the time it was happening.

In the car Temp stayed slouched against the door the whole way across town.

"All her treasures. She kept so many things her brothers and sisters gave her, and things her folks brought from the old country. She was going to send a lot of them to Aunt Carrie. Oh, my god, Carrie's the last one. All that family, five brothers and four sisters, now there's only one left. I'll have to call Aunt Carrie."

"I'll call her." Better yet, Joni could. Joni cries with people. It seems to help them.

"No!" He lurched upright against his seatbelt and then slumped back. I could almost see the tiny movements of his mother's head while she gave him a steady look. "No, thank

you. Momma would expect me to do it. It would be better coming from family. Soon there won't be family to tell. Who will talk about me when I'm gone?"

It sounded so much like a line from an old ballad that I had to stifle a laugh. News of death, especially violent death, can hit in the oddest ways.

"I'll call Rob and Tully. They'll want to come." His head came up, swiveling toward me. I could feel his hard stare, but he didn't say anything.

I turned onto my street. The house where I grew up, at the town end of Eusted Street, would have shattered windows, and I didn't know what else. Chief Jackson had said every house on the street had sustained some damage. The people had been rushed out of the area in case there was a chain reaction. Thinking about my parents, if they'd been there, sent chills through me.

Joni's and my house was in a newer section of town where we'd raised three kids and all the houses had sprawling lawns and patios, not porches. It would take Temp in and shelter him in its cluttered comfort. His place was a condo near the country club. Its black and white linear furnishings made it a cold place.

Mrs. McPherson had refused the bigger place he offered her.

She preferred her own house where, she said, she could walk through in the dark and know where she was.

"I signed her up for half a million in insurance. That was ten years ago," Temp was muttering, with his chin on his chest. "Just six months from now, she'd have been able to turn it into a lifetime income. She always did her best for me, and I wanted to do something for her." He turned to me. "You didn't know she was so close to sixty-five, did you, Chet?"

"No, Temp, I didn't." Actually, she'd looked older than both my seventyish parents. I'd have to telephone them, if only to reassure myself they were still there, enjoying Arizona.

My parents had cut me loose early in my life to make my own choices. Mrs. McPherson continued to cook meals and casseroles that she could freeze for Temp. I suspect she even called him to let him know it was laundry day. She kept him above bothersome chores. All this while she worked her hours at Clear-Haven Nursing Home.

I asked her one time why she'd given Temp such a dumb name, not that I put it that way.

She gave me that look that made us kids believe she could read our sinful thoughts. "If he

had been female, I would have named him after the great evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. When he turned out to be male, I thought of calling him Semple, but—"here there was a twinkle in the blue-gray eyes. "—I knew what his friends would do with that."

We did enough damage to "Temple," but she never heard any of that.

Chief Jackson came to our house to tell us it had been a gas leak. They'd shut things down fast enough to save the other houses from going off like popcorn. It was almost impossible for him to tell Temp that it was likely they wouldn't find enough of his mother to have a regular burial. Temp took the news without moving. In fact, beyond smashing through the office paneling, he hadn't moved much at all.

Joni suggested a memorial service—anytime Temp felt up to it. Maybe in our church.

"Momma was of no special denomination. She said all religions lead to the same place. I think Russ Marsh will let us use one of his rooms, but maybe your minister can say something." Temp gave her the smile I'd seen him give his mother following one of her signals. I'd worked it out that she meant, "Be nice," and his smile answered, "I'll try, Momma."

"I'm going to call Aunt Carrie. Can I use the phone in the study?"

Feeling totally useless, I walked him to the door of the study. Closing the door, I waited a few minutes, in case he fell apart, but when there was nothing but his murmuring rumble, I went back to Nate Jackson and Joni. She excused herself to go make coffee.

She was still out of the room when Temp came shuffling back. His eyes were red and moist. I was relieved. He'd been able to let go of some of the pain.

"It's pretty hard talking to her. She sounds just like Momma. All the sisters sounded alike. Well, now it won't be hard knowing which is which, will it?" He sat down heavily in an easy chair. "She's too upset to make the trip."

Later, when he'd gone to bed, Joni and I called my parents. I could have used a hug from my mother. Then I got in touch with Rob and Tully. Actually, I reached Tully's answering machine. I left a message for him to call. I'd just hung up from talking to Rob when Tully called back. With each of the guys, I had to go through a lot of memories. What a rowdy bunch we'd been. They both promised to come for the service.

The next morning Temp went back to his condo, and the air in the house seemed a little lighter. I felt guilty for being relieved that he was gone, but there had been no persuading him to stay. He said he had to be alone to face it head-on. I wondered at what cost to his condo he would face it, with no mother to stop him from going too far.

Shamefully, or maybe just plain humanly, I also thought about that half million in insurance. Now he could work full time on any number of his projects.

The memorial service was held on Thursday morning. Russ Marsh had to open two of his big rooms to accommodate everybody. Joni was sure many of the people were there just to be in on something big, but so many of them told Temp what a help his mother had been to a relative or friend of theirs in the nursing home Joni had to change her opinion.

She and I also overheard elderly Mr. Walker muttering something strange about Carrie to his daughter-in-law, who gently shushed him. Joni murmured something about old minds. Otherwise, I'd have thought I misunderstood.

He'd said, "They say Carrie was too sick to come home for

this. 'Course she couldn't come. She's dead."

I hoped when my mind started wandering like that someone would be there to bring me back.

We'd let a few people know we were gathering at our house after the service. I think Temp was disappointed we hadn't opened the country club to the public. He wanted to celebrate his momma's life.

Rob and Tully stayed long after everyone else had gone. Joni shooed the four of us into the study while she cleared away the dishes. We sat around, men pushing middle-age but together feeling like boys, and talked till nearly six. They left then so Joni wouldn't feel obligated to offer them a second meal.

Rob and Tully were going to see Temp home and then look up some of our other friends. Standing at the open door, Rob snapped his fingers and stepped back.

"Wait for me in the car, guys. I want to get a couple of addresses from Chet. These new houses on new streets have me lost."

They both kissed Joni on the cheek and went out. I watched them get into Temp's big Lincoln before I turned to face Rob. Something in his attitude made Joni reach up to kiss his cheek,

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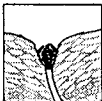
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then disappear into the kitchen. I led the way back to the study.

"You got those addresses when you called to tell me your flight number. So what do you really want?" Our alliances hadn't always been solid. Among six boys, lines could waver without warning, changing sometimes over nothing at all. Had there been a shifting that I hadn't noticed?

"Oh, I do have those, don't I?" He patted his suit jacket pocket. "I guess I wanted privacy so I could ask you if Temp ever hit you up for money. Whatever amount you could spare."

"No! Hell, no! He has money coming in all the time. With all his projects, it's like money floats in and sticks on him. If he falls into a stream, he comes up covered with gold dust. What's with you, Rob? Asking that?"

"Sorry." He looked relieved. "Maybe I misunderstood. He must have meant, did I want to invest in one of his projects. He ever ask you to invest in one?"

I laughed. "I have three kids in various stages of higher education and a mortgage. He knows I don't have any sizable amount to lay out. If I did, Joni would be doing things with the house." I came down on his shoulder with an open hand.

"Man, you should see how often his inventory changes. Temp doesn't need our help."

"Glad to hear that." Rob laughed, too, then frowned. "Maybe you can tell me why Temp would be so mad at Tully."

"What makes you think he is?" I parried. All our lives, when there was a battle brewing, we tried to let the participants fight it out. We didn't need to change now.

"Just the way they're acting. This morning Temp came close to punching Tully. They were hissing at each other like two ganders in my grandpa's barnyard."

"I don't know. Maybe the two of them were in a deal together, and it went bad. They could be blaming each other."

"Could be. I guess that's the best reason in the world for none of us to go partners."

I nodded in agreement.

After seeing Rob to the door, I went back to my study. I stood in the middle of the floor and wondered how much a yearly premium on half a million did cost. Then the question faded, and I began gathering glasses and paper napkins.

Temple wouldn't have known how to rig a gas line to explode. All his intricate schemes he had to put on paper for other people to work out. Besides,

that was his mother in that house, not to mention all the other people in the area. No, if he blew up anything, it would be his dealership.

We kept close tabs on Temp for a few weeks, and then it was he who drifted away. He stopped calling to tell me about any new projects. Considering his bereavement, I decided he'd be in no frame of mind to be coming up with any. Then, too, the store kept me busy. We had to keep coming up with our own projects to keep the customers coming in.

I heard stories about the way the insurance companies kept sifting through the dust of the McPherson house. No one wanted to pay without first looking for a way out. Someone, maybe Joni, said the antiques that had come from the old country would have been uninsurable. No one could have placed a definite value on them.

Until I'd grown up and become a supposedly responsible person, I'd barely seen all the treasures the McPherson living room held. The first time I went to call on Mrs. McPherson and she led me into the living room to sit, I felt as if I'd undergone some rite of passage.

As a boy, along with the other boys, I'd always been shooed straight across the corner from the kitchen down the

hall to Temp's bedroom, which was always in a state of chaos. Often in the evenings I'd get a glimpse of Mr. McPherson reading in his chair next to the front window. I had the feeling she'd arranged him, too, to fit the balance of the room.

There was no way of knowing whether Temp had collected the half million. It was not something he'd call up to crow about. People did mention he seemed to have more to say about other things. Did I notice how he didn't start saying something and then stop?

I had never noticed that. Maybe with our gang he'd always known he could say anything. None of us would have gone tattling back to his mother.

He didn't seem any different when we attended business people's dinner meetings. He'd always played the room, big and surefooted, able to make each person feel his attention was on him or her alone. I sometimes wished I had the knack. Everybody loved Temp.

Then one evening after a dinner, when he was on the dais and I was just one of the crowd, he came loping over to me. We shook hands and talked about this or that. It took him several minutes to get down to it.

"Can you come tomorrow? Something's come up. I need to

spread it out and give it a good look." He kept shifting from one foot to the other.

"Sure. It'll have to be lunchtime. I'll be busy all day with store business."

"Me too. I mean I'll be busy, too. I'll order in. Joni still got you on that diet?" I nodded guiltily, remembering the dinner I'd just eaten. "I'll make it real he-man stuff. Salads and decaf all around." He laughed like the old Temple.

Sure enough, the next day just after I arrived, a man came from the deli down the street with two large salads, no dressing. Temp provided the decaf. We were about halfway to the bottom of our Styrofoam bowls when Temp's private line rang. He grumbled about it, but he picked up the receiver.

I tried not to listen in, but I couldn't help overhearing him label the caller "Aunt Carrie," his only living relative. I got up and strolled out to the showroom to look at automobiles I could only dream about until long after my three kids were finished with college. Even though they were helping themselves, it was still a struggle.

After awhile, he called me back in.

"She wants to come live with me—or near me. She was here a few times visiting Momma—

before. She thinks my condo could use a little color." He laughed nervously. "She's just retired from her librarian's job."

"Then she's older than your mother?" Was this why he wanted to see me? To hear what I thought?

"Younger. She retired on years of service. She won't be eligible for Social Security for a few years yet. I've been sending her something. I offered to set her up in Florida, someplace warm, but she wants to come here. Most of the family is buried out in Center Hill Cemetery." He was trying to sell one of us on the idea, and I had no stake in it.

"It sounds as if she's been on her own long enough that she won't be looking to you to fill her time."

"True. She's like Momma that way." I don't usually catch people's feelings so quickly, Joni says I'm obtuse that way, but that time I caught something in Temp, a settling of something he'd been up in the air about. He laughed. "Other ways, she's nothing like Momma, or any other librarian you ever saw. Did I tell you I went to see her?"

"No."

"Yeah. There was a fuss about the town condemning her property so they could tear

down the house and put up, of all things, a senior citizen high-rise. I made them give her a good price for it."

I could just see him storming City Hall, blowing officials left and right.

After that, each time I saw him he seemed to be a little more with us, but as far as Joni was concerned, there was still something very wrong. She acted almost as if she didn't want him around.

When I challenged her on it, she said something that, to me, was completely off the wall. She said, "I can feel him searching for something, and it makes me uncomfortable. Sometimes I wonder how he's going to carry on without his momma here to tell him what moves to make. And don't give me that pitying look. You asked."

By the time he telephoned to invite us out to dinner to meet Carrie, Joni had begun to say the woman was a figment of his imagination. When we finally saw her, small and slender, beside Temp, we both thought *our* imaginations had gone haywire.

She looked the way Mrs. McPherson would have looked ten years ago if she'd suddenly started wearing shiny blue pantsuits and had given up her gray beauty salon curls for a long silvery braid. Close up, we

could see her eyes were as blue as the suit, and her long nails were a bright pink.

"You are Joni, and you are Chet." She offered her cheek to be kissed, which we did. I tasted powder. Mrs. McPherson had always smelled of Ivory soap. No one ever kissed her cheek. Joni's eyebrows went up, and I knew she'd gotten a whiff of expensive perfume. Joni's the one who selects the better toiletries for the store. She knows her stuff. "Temp has told me so much about his friends. I hope if I come back home to live, we can be friends, too. All my old friends seem to be dead or retired to warmer places."

We assured her we'd like to be friends. Over dinner, in the best restaurant in town, we found she was much easier to talk to than Momma, who'd always reminded us that, as kind-hearted as she was, she was still the authority figure. Carrie seemed to be of no special age. She laughed at Temp's outrageous description of a new project, something to do with microwave ovens and alarm clocks. I don't even remember now. I thought at the time it would never work.

People kept coming to the table to meet Carrie until we had an impromptu party going. It was rather funny watching the

doubletake some of them did when they got within a few feet of the table. Carrie welcomed everybody. Her sister would have withdrawn unnoticed to sit quietly, listening to the bright conversations going on around her. Temple wouldn't have dared bringing her to such a restaurant in the first place. They sold wine to go with dinner.

All evening I'd been noticing that things weren't quite right. I looked at Joni for confirmation. She shrugged her shoulders in that "I told you so" way she has.

Each time Temp said something outrageous or even ordered another bottle of wine, I watched his eyes going sideways toward his Aunt Carrie. If there was any movement of her well-kept hands, he tensed, almost as if he was ready to duck out of the way. I'd never seen Momma go beyond those signals. Striking him had never been necessary.

Carrie was having such a good time that she never caught on that she was supposed to react in some way. Any gestures she did make were connected with her part of the conversation, nothing else.

Temp kept fighting with everything that was in him to keep the spark of mischief going, but what was the use of be-

ing outrageous if he shocked no one who counted? No matter how hard our friends laughed in appreciation of his wit, they couldn't keep him from wilting. It was as if he'd lost his footing, and was losing the battle to get it back.

Finally, when the waiters were good and sick of us, the party began breaking up. Temp grabbed the check to scribble his name across it. When I saw the percentage of tip he added, my jaw went slack. Money had come in from somewhere, enough for him to be stupid about it. Did that insurance policy have a double-indemnity clause?

When I raised my eyes, I was expecting Momma McPherson's shocked and forbidding expression. It was a jolt to see Carrie's bland interest in the high numbers. What did one expensive dinner matter to someone as successful as her nephew?

Until that moment, my memories of all my visits with Mrs. McPherson had run together. I still don't know what made me think of the last one. It was no different from the others.

I guess she didn't feel very formal that day. She asked me if I'd like a cup of tea in the kitchen. Tea in the kitchen meant it was served in what she called her five-and-ten

cups, big white ones, filled with strong brew. There was always a hefty cheese sandwich with it. If Joni knew I'd been to see Mrs. McPherson, she'd serve me a healthful salad for dinner.

Most of our conversations over tea were about children, mine and hers. She was as proud of my children as if she'd been their grandmother. She thought I'd done well in choosing a wife, too, a bright woman who could lead the way. I sometimes felt what a waste it was how she'd kept Temp from finding a Joni of his own.

"Don't you miss having grandchildren, Mrs. McPherson?" I asked, trying awkwardly to tease her. She was never easy to kid around with.

She glanced around the immaculate kitchen, then gave me a look that had always let us boys know we'd done some great social wrong. Even if we hadn't, we searched our minds to dig out what we'd thought of doing.

"And have another woman traipsing herself through here? If God could give me grandchildren without a daughter-in-law, I'd take a few. Girls. I've had my boy."

Then she changed the subject.

"It's lucky you caught me today. I haven't even told Temple yet—it came so out of the blue.

The new administration can't leave well enough alone. They're moving the residents all around the different rooms. 'To meet new people,' they say. They're even messing with our work schedules. We're being rotated—as if we were tires or something. It's a nuisance."

I wondered how she could have worked all those years in a job where other people made all the decisions.

"Chet?" I could barely hear Joni, and for a moment, I wondered how she'd gotten into the conversation. She laughed. "Daydreamer. Temp is trying to get through to you."

"Huh?" I must have looked really strange. "Sorry, I was . . ." I couldn't say what I'd been doing. It was no time to bring up Mrs. McPherson's name.

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, pal." Temp was standing with his hands on the back of Carrie's chair. "The ladies are going to powder their noses. Let's go wait in the great outdoors." He was trying to send me a message.

What project had come to him in the midst of all that babble? Or *was* it a project? He didn't have that driven look. Whatever, it didn't matter. I was going to make it clear to him that, for the rest of the eve-

ning, I preferred my wife's company to his.

I followed Temp's big form across the room and out the side door directly into the parking lot. The exhaust-laden air lay heavy, the way it does before a good rain. Instead of going to either of our cars, Temp stalked to the far edge of the blacktop to stand in the shadow of the tall hedge. He faced the lot. In the peculiarly yellow light I saw his gaze raking from one side of the lot to the other.

"Will we be hearing sinister mood music with our conversation?" I asked with a laugh.

"I want you to help me kill Tully." His rumble barely reached my ears. Where had he learned to talk like that? "I mean it, man. You're the only person I can trust to help me with this. You get Tully back here . . ."

"Temp! Stop it!" This was no joke. "Stop it! Tully is one of us! My god!" I shivered. "You're scaring me!"

"I mean it, Chet. We have to kill Tully. He botched the job, and I can't rest till he's dead." If Temp had made just one grand gesture, given his arm a wild swing, I'd have known the scene was genuine. He just stood there, and the only thing moving was his lips. "He knows it all, and that's bad for me."

"So you lost some money on a deal. What's money to you but something to play with? You'll work out a project and get it all back." People aren't going to fault Temple McPherson for one financial loss.

"He killed Momma! He was only supposed to blow up the damn house and all that stuff I was forever falling over." Temp's whisper gave the words an added horror. "Then the insurance company reneged on paying for those things that came from the Old Sod."

"Joni said there was no way to put a price on them." I needed to sit down before I just folded up into something that could be kicked under a car. There wasn't any place. "Why would Tully blow up your mother's house? Why the hell would he do that?" My fist came up and smacked him squarely on the chest. It jarred me more than it did him. "What did he have against her?"

"Not *her*! She wasn't supposed to be there! Damn it! I thought I knew her schedule. Tully was supposed to check the house or pay a quick visit to her at the home, but . . ." His eyes glinted with tears.

"He couldn't do that. People would know he was in town. Why Tully? Do you have something on him? Did you blackmail him?" I raised my fist, but

the ache in my wrist reminded me who'd get hurt.

"Hell, no! I didn't have to do that. Tully's a demo man." I must have looked as stupefied as I felt. "Demolitions. You need anything blown up, and I mean anything, he'll do it."

"How do you know that?" Why wasn't I challenging his wild story?

"When you need someone, you can find him." He shrugged. "Just kid around enough, and be serious enough. Someone gets the hint. Besides, Tully never had it in him to be a straight undercover cop, so I figured he had another reason for never telling us what he does. If he had turned out to be undercover, I would have told him I'd caught on to what he was. I was going to have Momma sue the gas company, too."

"Gee, just think what you lost out on there." I sneered. The combination of nauseating air and rotten truth was getting to me. "Why? Tell me why before I figure out a way to break your damn neck! Never mind! Rob gave me a clue, and I laughed it off. Temp can't need money! It just keeps rolling in! When you endorsed the check, did you write through the blood or around it?"

"Oh, shut up," he said mildly, as if I'd made a bad joke.

"They're coming out. Come on. You stay home tomorrow. I'll be by to talk. Have Joni out of the house."

"I don't want to talk!" His big hand closing around my arm silenced me.

"Just shut up!" His warm breath filled my ear. "Remember, you know what I know, and if Tully finds out... He has friends."

I wished I'd kept in touch with a state trooper I met when we both had small children in kindergarten. He must be a major by now.

Joni took one look at me and held her hand out for the keys. I gave them willingly. She knew exactly how much I'd had to drink, but she didn't question me.

At home, she sent me straight to bed with a tall glass of something fizzing to help my digestion.

What little sleep I did get was filled with dreams about being in a crater with huge kernels of popcorn going off all around me. Tully stood on the rim of the crater pushing more kernels down on me.

Joni was up before I could stir myself even to sit on the edge of the bed. I was holding onto my head for dear life. When the phone rang, she grabbed it on the first ring. Then she started to dress.

"I have a meeting. I'll tell your office you won't be in." She laid a maternal kiss on my forehead. "No fever, but still . . ."

I let her go without saying anything. What was there to say? That two people closer to me than brothers were criminals? Temp might not think so, but he was a bigger criminal than Tully.

Tully! How could he go from a bright-eyed boy looking forward to fame and fortune to a demo? Hearing the word, I'd immediately pictured Tully on a carnival fairway doing a sing-song spiel about one of Temp's projects.

Temp wanted me to help kill him! My god! Just how much loyalty was a guy supposed to have? I wasn't a killer. I'd never even gone game hunting with the rest of them.

I staggered to the bathroom to take a stinging hot shower. Dressed, I headed for the study.

I knew it wouldn't be long.

The front door opens and closes. I'd forgotten, for the moment, that Temp has a key, just as we have a key for his place. I wish with everything in me that, when he steps into the doorway, he'll be light-footing it and grinning.

I blink, and there he is, deathly still except for the key ring dangling from his big fingers. I know he holds our

housekey between his thumb and forefinger.

I can't believe I'm asking the question.

"Why didn't you blow the car lot? You could have done it in the middle of the night when no one was around."

"That's where I needed the money. The insurance cops would have jumped on it." The keys jingle. "Joni at the store?"

There is my choice—Joni for Tully. It's the magic wand that turns me to stone.

"You mentioned Tully's friends. I imagine he's a specialist in great demand. In the right circles."

I know my message has soaked through when Temp turns and leaves the house. He lets the door drift shut on its own.

Chilled by my own sweat, I'm still waiting. Shouldn't I call someone? How about the state trooper, major, whatever? What do I tell him?

Whatever it is, Temple McPherson, big man, big reputation, will laugh it off. He'll say, "Poor old Chet. He was partying so much I had to take him outside. Ask his wife. She'll tell you how he couldn't go to work the next day."

Right now I'm missing Momma McPherson a lot more than her son ever could.

FICTION



VIGILANTE

by David Braly

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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It began when justice was denied. It had been denied countless times, and unfortunately our county has had its share of these lamentable occasions. But the grey, leafless, oppressively gloomy day in the late fall when Judge Luther Graves let loose Harry Cobb will always be recalled with a shudder by the citizens of Hogansville. For that day was hideously special. Not because justice was denied; that was the beginning alone. Rather because the day marked the dark boundary in time between the laws developed and enforced by a civilized society and the hateful passion of an old era that we thought had died.

We had a strong case against Cobb, but not strong enough. I have no doubt in my own mind that he was guilty. I know that my deputies were of identical mind. We could prove beyond any doubt that he killed Raul Castillo, but of course that much he never denied. Where we fell short was proving why he killed him.

Understand, we knew why; we simply couldn't prove it. Cobb claimed that Castillo had sneaked into his house with the intent of committing burglary. He had caught him in the act, he said, and shot him twice in the head. Oregon law clearly states that anyone has the legal right to use deadly force if he believes his life is threatened. Even if the intruder is unarmed, as was the case with Castillo, and fleeing the house, as was not the case with Castillo, deadly force is permitted.

I was, however, certain that Castillo had not intruded, that in fact Cobb had invited him into the house. I believed that Cobb had planned all along to claim Castillo broke into the house, when in reality Cobb lured him there for the settled purpose of murdering him.

I shan't delve into all the reasons why I believe this. They are not important in explaining the dismal events that followed in the wake of Cobb's release from jail. Suffice it to say, there were no signs of forced entry at the house, Castillo had no record as a burglar (although he was a vicious man with a long record of other criminal activities), and Cobb owed Castillo money that was due and that he could not pay. But the judge refused to waste public money on a trial that offered no prospect of a satisfactory outcome. Yes, the judge too knew that Cobb was guilty. We all knew it. And I have no doubt that the jurors would have known it had they been allowed to hear our evidence. What is more, I'm sure that Judge Graves knew that the jurors would have known it. None of it mattered, however, because even jurors who knew he was guilty would

have had that reasonable doubt that would force them against their will to vote him not guilty and set him loose. The judge, foreseeing all this and knowing only too well the melancholy state of the public coffers, merely anticipated the event.

I watched from the big front doors of the old stone courthouse while Cobb and his lawyer walked past the flagpole and the war veterans' memorial plaque and the edge of the long row of barren maple trees. I resented them both, for different reasons, but could do nothing. When they reached the main sidewalk that borders the street, Cobb suddenly turned around and looked right at me, as though he had known all along that I was standing there bitterly watching him depart. A lanky, unshaven, somber middle-aged man with a usually vacant stare, he flashed a yellow smile and waved insolently. His lawyer, a smallish man in his late twenties with a drooping mustache and granny glasses, cracked a sadistic smile. They turned onto the main sidewalk and went down it, I supposed toward the lawyer's office on Main Street. I watched them appear and disappear repeatedly between the barren maples that lined the sidewalk, until finally they were out of view.

When I returned to the office, I told the two deputies who were there at the time that I wanted Cobb to receive special attention. "We probably will never be able to nail him for the murder," I told them, "but we know he deals in drugs and stolen property, and if we keep watch, we should be able to send him up for something."

Having said that, and knowing that my other deputies would soon get the word from those who had heard it from me, I went to my desk and resumed work on cases still open. The most important of these was vandalism being committed in and near Hogansville by people using a pellet gun. They drove through the streets at night and targeted glass. Because a pellet gun is virtually silent, few people were aware of the damage to their property until morning. The vandals were especially attracted to the glass in cars and pickups, which shattered to pieces when the tiny pellet hit, and the large doors and windows of stores and restaurants. In two months they had inflicted more than thirty thousand dollars' worth of damage, prompted hundreds of residents who normally parked their cars beside the curb or in driveways to hide them behind houses and trees, and enraged the community more than any criminals had done in many years. We had no clues. The nature of the crime told us that they were young males, however, and the persistence revealed that they lived in or near town.

We were alert for the vandals again that evening. I myself was patrolling the rural roads east of town in the forlorn hope that I might just stumble upon the perpetrators in the act. Almost any activity would have been suspicious that particular evening. It was one of those desolate, bleak, dull nights when honest people stayed home and criminals themselves felt uneasy in the black shadows of the cold moon. The leaves had fallen, but the first real snow had not yet arrived, although it was expected from day to day and week to week. It was not a time when young men of honest intent would be driving down a rural road unless they lived somewhere along it.

I had just passed the Travis place on Cougar Creek Road when the dispatcher's voice came over the radio.

"Any available unit, see to pickup on Burris Market Road. We have a call from a motorist who almost hit it. She said it's parked half on and half off the road."

"Central dispatch, this is forty-two," Williams said. "I can check on the pickup. Whereabouts on Burris is it?"

"She said it was just past the turn, a quarter-mile before you reach the Cobb place."

The Cobb place? Momentarily I considered joining Williams in investigating the pickup. I decided not to because Burris Market Road was a short distance from Hogansville, a good ten miles from where I was. If the matter involved Harry Cobb, Williams would know what to do. Nevertheless, when I reached a wide place in the road, I turned around and started back for town.

Five minutes later Williams' voice came over the radio again:

"Central dispatch, this is forty-two. Is the sheriff on duty to-night?"

"Affirmative. He's on patrol in the east part of the county."

I lifted my microphone and pressed the button. "Forty-two, this is forty. What's the problem?"

"Sheriff, I think you'd better come over to Burris Market Road near the Harry Cobb place as soon as possible."

"What's the problem?"

"I would rather not say over the air."

What I found when I arrived was Cobb's three-year-old Ford pickup half on and half off a desolate stretch of the road in an isolated area of sagebrush and juniper. Potato-shaped hills towered black in the distance, as sullen and silent as the dark arid land below them. Except for the moon and stars, there were no lights

here, only the absolute darkness of the eastern Oregon desert. Harry Cobb, seated behind the steering wheel of the pickup with a bullet hole in his forehead, died in about as dreary a place as any human being could.

We searched the area for clues and found none. We questioned relatives of Raul Castillo and known enemies of Harry Cobb, but found no one more suspicious than the others. We did all the other things police investigators working on a murder case are supposed to do, and failed to develop any leads or find any evidence. We had a real mystery on our hands. What was worse, after a week had passed without a break in the case, I began to fear that we would never be able to solve it.

The public did not care. In one way, I was pleased. I was an elected official, and people normally expected and wanted me to perform my job successfully. If I did not discover the identity of the killer and arrest him, I was not performing the job successfully. Therefore it was a relief that people simply didn't care. However, it also troubled me that people didn't care that a man had been murdered, even when the victim was so wretched a creature as Harry Cobb.

Shortly after Cobb's murder I encountered two members of the five-member county commission talking in the courthouse parking lot, Arvin Phelps and Norm Abelman. When they saw me approaching, Phelps immediately demanded an account of the progress I had made in catching the vandals. I told him I had made none. We talked about it for awhile. Phelps was especially upset because his own left-side car window had been shot out the previous night and the bill for replacing the glass would be a hundred and fifty dollars. After awhile, the conversation drifted to the murder mystery.

"Who cares who killed him?" asked Phelps. "The man was scum."

"The only good thing he ever did for this community," added Abelman, "was kill Raul Castillo."

Those words were pretty much the same being spoken by others in the county. Right or wrong, for good or bad, most people simply didn't care. Those who did were pleased by the deaths.

That same day when I spoke with Phelps and Abelman, Orville Myrow met his end. Actually, as in Cobb's case, it happened in the evening. We had had a cold snap that lasted a few days, and it was especially frigid that night. A light snow was falling. Only a few people were about, although unfortunately the vandals were

among that number. I was investigating a broken pickup window at the Ward place north of town when Myrow died.

Orville Myrow was one of the most vicious men who ever walked the streets of Hogansville. Unlike Castillo, he was not motivated by greed. He was simply mean. Really mean. He had killed another boy in a dispute over a car horn when he was eighteen, burying a knife in the youngster's chest, which had sent Myrow to reform school until the age of twenty-one. He had returned to Hogansville where for the next twenty-five years he had beaten, abused, raped, bullied, and assaulted his fellow citizens, in the whole time spending less than three years in prison and jail. On the night of his death, he had gone home drunk, beaten the daylights out of his eleven-year-old son, and threatened the protesting mother with a butcher knife. After putting his fist through a lampshade, he had stormed out of the house and promptly been shot dead.

Fortunately, the case was not mine. Myrow had lived and died within the town limits of Hogansville, which put the investigation under the jurisdiction of the town's police chief, Brian McDowel. Often we worked together (as we were in trying to apprehend the vandals), but there seemed at first no reason to do so on this occasion. Not until, that is, the ballistics report came in from the state crime lab in Salem.

Harry Cobb and Orville Myrow had been killed with the same gun.

To say that this development came as a surprise would by no means convey the complete astonishment that both McDowel and I felt upon hearing of it. As far as we knew, there was no connection between Cobb and Myrow. Although both were lifelong criminals, they were criminals of different interests and circles. They did not appear to have known each other.

It was only two nights later that Stanley Stapleton stepped out of his car on Main Street and received two bullets in the heart. A witness said that he saw the killer from a distance, a man dressed in a wide-brimmed hat who fired a long pistol from the hip. As for Stapleton, he had been arrested seven years before for the rape and murder of a young woman, but had been set loose because two juries deadlocked over a dubious alibi and a third ruled him not guilty. Afterward, protected against double jeopardy, he had freely bragged about the crime. Although this caused even the lowest class of citizens to shun him, Stapleton had continued to live in Hogansville and retained his job with the federal government.

This time it was no surprise when the markings on the bullets used to kill Stapleton matched those on the bullets that killed Myrow and Cobb. We knew now that we had a vigilante at work.

The public approved. Indeed, a few people were delighted. Someone, they said, was finally dealing in an effective manner with the crime problem.

Three days after the Stapleton murder I was walking along Main Street when someone motioned with a wave of the arm for me to enter Glon's Barber Shop. It was Norm Abelman, seated near the end table waiting his turn to get his hair cut. The stout whitehaired commissioner smiled broadly when I walked in.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of our vigilante?"

"I think we need to catch him real quick before he murders anyone else."

"Executes is a better word. No one deserved the death penalty more than the three scumbags he has rid us of."

"That's for the judicial system to decide, not a vigilante."

"The judicial system doesn't work. Too many crooks and too many rules and too many lawyers. Vigilantism works. Always has. From the colonial era into this century, nothing has stopped crime faster or scared away felons more thoroughly than an aroused citizenry taking justice into their own hands, without regard to the supposed rights of criminals or to so-called due process."

"I won't deny the truth of that," I said, "but I don't think you can deny that vigilantes as often murder the innocent as the guilty."

"You're talking about the Hogansville Regulators," he said. "That was different."

The Hogansville Regulators were organized in 1864 to drive thieves out of the nearby gold camps. Instead, their leaders had set themselves up as bosses of the county, and had backed their play with six-shooters. They had murdered a half dozen men in cold blood, not for thievery but for opposing them. They had fallen from power only after local citizens had organized in their own self-defense and shot down two of the most violent, Black Jack Potter and Vic Gilbert. A third gunman, the half-crazed murderer Nat Sims, had hanged himself in the attic of the old Ingersoll Hotel, which was now the Jahnke boarding house.

"How was it different?" I wanted to know. "Wherever self-appointed arbiters of justice take control, they enforce their own version of justice. Any resemblance between it and the normal definition of justice is usually nothing more than a coincidence."

"You're exaggerating."

"Norm, you're a community leader. You have a responsibility not to endorse this sort of behavior. The laws exist for a reason. We can't ignore it when someone goes outside them merely because we believe that it helps society in the short run. Once a man steps over the line, and thinks he has a right to murder with impunity, he can strike out at anyone."

"Good. I hope the next person he strikes out at is one of these drug pushers who are selling dope to our kids."

That very evening the vigilante did precisely what Norm Abelman had hoped. A pusher whom we had been observing for several weeks and were almost ready to arrest, Freddy Lang, was drilled with lead when he stepped from his car in front of his house. No witnesses this time, but ballistics confirmed that the gun used to kill him had been the same one used on Harry Cobb and Orville Myrow and Stanley Stapleton.

The following night the anchor of the local radio station's talk show did the whole program on one subject: the vigilante. He received thirty calls, and twenty-eight of them expressed grim approval of the vigilante.

Only four days passed before we had yet another murder, again inside the town limits. This time the victim was Andy Sloane. He was yet another creature few would miss. Sloane had been in trouble with the law from the time he was twelve years old. During the ensuing thirty-six years he had accumulated convictions for vandalism, theft (many counts of both petty and grand), possessing illegal substances, distributing illegal substances, negotiating bad checks, obstructing justice, driving under the influence of intoxicants, driving while suspended, assault, battery, shoplifting, probation violation, speeding, unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, violation of a restraining order, marital assault and battery, possessing stolen property, selling guns without a license, fraud, evading a police officer, assault with a deadly weapon, being a felon in possession of a firearm, lying to a peace officer, trespassing, criminal mischief, and creating a public nuisance. He was living in a shack by the railroad spur that runs out to the old Freidel sawmill. We suspected that he was dealing methamphetamine from the shack. It was isolated, surrounded by barren elm trees and a falling down picket fence with most of the pickets missing, and lay in a depression below the street and fields. Traffic on the street was normally light at night, because it was primarily a truck route,

and usually there was no foot or bike traffic at all. But the night of the murder a sixty-seven-year-old retired farm worker was walking down the street at the very moment Mr. Sloane came to the end of his career and life.

"I was walking along Ashton Street," he told McDowel, "and I heard this knocking in the night. I had been to my sister's house, visiting my brother-in-law and trying to borrow some money until my check comes next week, and we visited too late, and I was walking home in the dark and thinking it would probably snow if it weren't so cold, when I heard this knocking sound from somewhere below the street. I looked down to where it was coming from. It was that little shack down below the road, by the railroad, with the patched walls and tarpaper roof. Someone was knocking on the door. The door opened. The light from inside the shack came out and showed me the man who had been knocking. The man who opened the door was a tall, thin man with a wasted face and his shirttail hanging down. He looked at the man who stood before him, screamed, 'No!', and stepped back. Two shots rang out. Loud shots. When the man outside walked away from the door, I could see through smoke the man in the shack lying on the floor. I could even see the blood."

"Did you recognize the killer?" McDowel had asked him. When the witness said that he did not, the police chief asked, "Can you at least describe him?"

"Oh, definitely. I'll never forget what the man looked like as long as memory lasts. He was of medium height and weight. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, like a cowboy hat, only it sort of slouched down at the ends. He wore a slicker that covered his shirt and most of his pants. He wore cowboy boots, and his pants were tucked into the tops of the boots. I never saw his face. His gun was a long-barreled pistol. You know, like an old Colt .45 or something."

So it was now confirmed. It wasn't merely a falling out among thieves. We really were dealing with some sort of psycho. I don't mean to say that all people who order slickers through the mail or buy old fashioned pistols are mental cases. Not at all. But I do believe that a man who dresses that way and who also in cold blood murders five other people is more likely—indeed, is certain—to be a psycho than a fashion-conscious crook who is killing other crooks because of some sort of falling out. McDowel agreed with my assessment, and so did the members of the state police who were now working with us on the case.

We now had five coldblooded murders, but the public still supported the vigilante.

We noticed that four local drug dealers took vacations at this time. Most of our local criminals stayed put. Some because they did not really think of themselves as criminals, whatever the law or society might think, and saw no reason for concern. Some because the "I'll never get caught" mentality suffocated all instincts for self-preservation. Some because they believed the other guy would get it, not them. But most, I'm convinced, did not believe that the vigilante was a true vigilante. They believed that something else was going on that the police and press either were not revealing or did not know about, that it was some sort of criminal deal gone bad, one partner knocking off the others.

And then the vigilante surprised us.

Until now he had killed known criminals, men who had been brought up on charges at one time or another. But one icy cold, barren, dreary night in December, he gunned down several guys we'd never been able to identify.

He killed the vandals.

It happened the first night of the first real snow we'd gotten that winter. It had been a cold day, but not as cold as earlier in the month, and the sky had been a slate of dark grey from dawn until dusk. It began to snow about seven thirty that evening. The flakes were big and they came down heavily, so we knew that this was a big one. The sort of night, we thought, that criminals would stay home. We were wrong.

Shortly after eight o'clock we received a call from Robert Martin saying that someone had shot out the glass doors at the drugstore. The vandals were on the prowl again.

I called McDowel, and within five minutes every available city and county cop was in a car, looking for the perpetrators.

Shortly before nine o'clock the dispatcher's voice came over the radio: "We have a report of a shooting near Seventh and Pilot. R.P. reports that three people have been shot and that the shooter walked away on foot."

I hurried to the scene. Although it was within the town limits, because of the vigilante and vandalism cases we were pretty much ignoring jurisdictional boundaries by that time. All that McDowel or I either one cared about was stopping the series of crimes that had cast a shadow over our community.

They were shot through the windshield of a four-year-old Dodge sedan. Seventeen-year-old Harold Newell had been the driver and had been drilled right between the eyes. Beside him was seated fifteen-year-old Chuck Rand, who now had a hole through his forehead. In the back seat, with a bullet hole through his temple, was fourteen-year-old Alan Thompson. The pellet rifle lay on the floor in front of Rand. All the boys were dead. They had been in a residential neighborhood and there were no witnesses to the shooting itself. One man had looked out when he heard the shots and noticed someone in a wide-brimmed hat walking away, across a lot between Seventh and Sixth streets.

We thought we might have a chance to get the murderer because the shooting had occurred only minutes before our arrival and we knew the direction he'd taken. Williams, Lopez, and I started after him on foot while McDowel directed the patrol cars in a sweep to cover everything in town between Seventh and First streets and even south of First. I had planned to follow the killer's footprints in the snow. Unfortunately, although we looked for them the width of the lot that the witness saw him cross, we could not find them. So we simply headed straight south, taking a route that might (or might not) be logical for a fugitive.

He escaped.

At least the murders had brought one benefit. They woke up the public to the fact that this man was not doing our community any favors, that indeed we had a psychopathic serial killer on the loose. All the boys had come from respected families, and the youngest one had never been in any trouble before. The murders outraged the entire town, indeed much of the state. The vandalism was forgotten. A local businessman who had suffered over a thousand dollars' worth of damage to his glass doors and windows now joined with the parents of the boys and several other people to offer a five thousand dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the vigilante.

Nine days later a dog was shot to death. We could hardly believe that the vigilante had anything to do with so mundane a killing, but to be sure we sent the fatal bullet to Salem. Yes, reported the crime lab, it came from the same gun as the others. The only thing we could figure was that the psycho gunned the dog down because it was not on a leash, as required by law. Although we were naturally pleased that this latest victim had not been a human being, the dog's demise probably cast a deeper gloom over us than had any

of the killings other than those of the young vandals. I believe that everyone in the county experienced a nearly identical melancholy. Not out of love for the animal, though. Rather because the killing of the dog for not wearing a leash, more than any of the human murders, indicated how warped the mind of the killer really was.

"Something has got to be done about the crime problem" is how Commissioner Arvin Phelps put it, "but this vigilante is as murderous as some of the old Regulators were, and he must be stopped before he starts plugging people for spitting on the sidewalk or smoking in public buildings."

Phelps wasn't off by even an inch.

It was early in January that the next murder occurred. The snow was two feet deep on the frozen ground, the streets a mix of red cinder and white snow, and the temperature almost cold enough to freeze fire. The sky was as black as ink despite the light radiating from the ground cover, and everything was frozen into stillness. I was having my third doughnut at the Log Cabin Cafe on Second Street when I heard the shot, loud and clear.

I knew it was him. There wasn't the slightest doubt in my mind that it was the vigilante. Partly because he was the only idiot who would venture outside on such an icy night to shoot a gun. Mostly because the gun itself sounded like one of those old Colt .45 revolvers.

And it was him.

When I ran outside, I saw Stan Lancaster lying next to his new Jeep, blood gushing from the hole in his head, beneath the town's newest "Handicapped Parking Only" sign. A block away and across the street, walking slowly down the sidewalk, was a man in a wide-brimmed hat and a green slicker.

I drew my Beretta and ran across the street in pursuit. Initially I did not call out to him. I feared that if I did he would be more likely to run and escape. He had a block's headstart, which was significant because I was pursuing him over a slick and snowy street. I wanted to reduce the distance between us before he learned of my pursuit. So I ran after him, cutting the distance between us as he continued to walk down the sidewalk, but I ran as softly and quietly as I could manage on the snow.

Halfway between Willow and Canal streets, at the alley, he turned. He entered the alley. I was now only thirty feet behind him but feared that I had lost him. Time and time again he had gotten away.

I reached the alley, tightened my grip on the gun, and turned into it, half expecting an ambush. I looked down the alley and saw the man still calmly walking away. I chased after him.

Although I was running and he was walking, for some reason I made little progress in cutting the distance between us. I concluded that the snow that lay two feet deep in the alley was holding me back, and I should step in the footprints he had left in the snow. That's when I noticed that he had left none.

He stopped.

I stopped.

He reached into his slicker, drew out something, raised it to his mouth, reached into the slicker again, and then struck a match on the side of an old outside stairway.

I ran forward, gun leveled.

He held the match up to something in front of his mouth, tossed it into the snow, and lowered a smoking cigar to his side.

I stopped, only six feet from him.

He started up the old wooden stairs.

"Hold it!" I shouted, aiming the gun at his back.

He continued to ascend the stairs, taking no notice of me.

"Freeze or I'll shoot!"

He continued up the stairs, giving no sign whatsoever that he had heard me.

Should I shoot? Or was he deaf?

He stepped onto the landing and turned toward the door. Between him and the door was a distance of about seven feet, but that was enough. I redirected my aim to the door, and pulled the trigger.

Splinters popped off the door from the hole that suddenly appeared in it, and dust flew off the whole door. Even if he'd failed to hear the shot, he could not fail to see all the dust suddenly fly off directly in front of him.

It didn't even slow him down. He continued toward the door without breaking his stride.

But when he reached the door, he did not open it. Instead, he turned and looked up the alley, the gloved hand holding the cigar resting on the rail. Over my gunsights I got my first look at him, and his was a face—or an expression, or rather a lack of an expression—that I have never forgotten.

Often I have heard of psychos whose eyes betray them because "there's nothing there." He had those eyes. More significantly, he

had that sort of face. There was nothing in it. It was a long face, ghastly ashen, with dead eyes and a sweeping handlebar mustache that looked so smooth and shiny it might have been made of plastic. Nothing about the face—not the eyes or the mouth or the wrinkles—expressed any sort of emotion. There was no sign of life in that face. A cadaver would have more personality.

"Get your hands up!" I ordered.

He appeared not to hear, see, or otherwise notice me.

After a few seconds he turned toward the door.

I fired—twice, rapidly—aiming for the middle of his back.

He was only six or seven feet from me, and I am an excellent pistol shot. I could not miss. Each of those bullets would go in precisely the square inch I had aimed for.

He calmly stepped up to the door and opened it.

I fired again, and again, and again, until my gun was empty.

Unfazed and seemingly untouched (there was no sudden appearance of a hole in the cloth, no spurting of blood), he opened the door and stepped inside. He closed the door behind him. I could see the holes in the door that had been made by the bullets from my Beretta after they had gone through the vigilante.

Moments later McDowel and one of his officers came running down the alley, either having trailed me from the site of Lancaster's body or having heard the shots.

"What happened?" McDowel asked.

"What does that door up there enter into?"

"It's the back door into Jahnke's boardinghouse."

"Jahnke's . . . That's where the Regulator Nat Sims hanged himself, isn't it?"

"Yeah. . . . Why?"

I continued to stare at the bullet-ventilated door for a moment and then said, "I think we have a bigger problem than we originally believed."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I think I emptied my gun into a ghost."

They looked at each other, and I realized it would take me awhile to convince them.

Actually, I never did convince them. Not one of them. Some people thought that I had lost my mind. Others, that I was drunk or high on something out of the evidence room. Still others, that I had shot an actual man, who managed to escape with one or more of my bullets in him.

Because the vigilante did not reappear. That icy night in January marked his final walk through Hogansville, the final murder of his last victim.

"You're not being reasonable," McDowel argued with me later. "How could a ghost shoot real bullets?"

He had a point. The bullets killed people. The bullets were even examined by the state crime lab. I asked them to reexamine them to see if they could determine the manufacturer and date. They informed me that the bullets had disappeared. It caused quite a commotion in Salem.

I held to my story and still do. I wish I could have held to my job as strongly. I was not reelected, and I blame Nat Sims.

All I can do now is wait. I know that he walked through the door unhurt. He's still up there, in the attic of Jahnke's boarding-house, and someday for some reason he'll come down again. Everyone will know I was right when it happens.

Only four months ago somebody shot and killed an unleashed dog on Mill Street. It's not absolute proof, I know, but it is evidence. They didn't find the bullet.

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FICTION

THE CASE OF THE PERFIDIOUS PUPIL

by Albert
Bashover

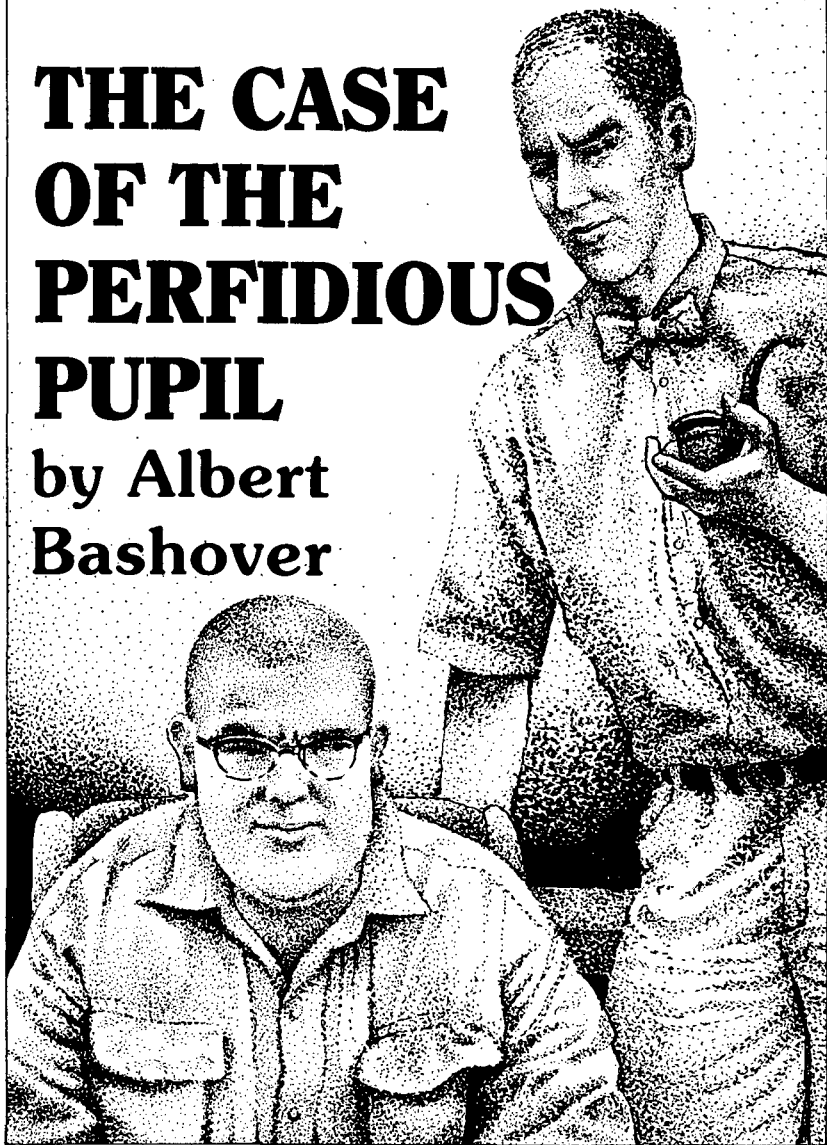


Illustration by Mark Penta

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Even the great detective Edgar Snavelly (When Snavelly's involved, no crime goes unsolved) could find himself between jobs occasionally. Usually his free time was taken up with the writing of his memoirs, including the details of the many crimes he had solved and the explanation of his particular methods of deductive reasoning. On this day, however, he had written himself into a glassy-eyed, mind-numbing writer's block. That is why he volunteered to act, or, more precisely, allowed himself to be pressured into acting, as a substitute parent to his not too beloved nephew Vincent "The Tank" Morrison.

Vincent's absent father had decided a couple of years ago that he preferred nubile nineteen-year-old bubbleheads with no children to the mother of an oversized teenage troublemaker. Since then, the boy's mother, Doris, used her brother Edgar as a substitute father every time she could. She had tearfully reasoned to her brother Edgar, over the telephone, that he could do a much better job of getting Vincent out of his most recent school difficulties than she could, especially since Vincent's problems included the accusation of robbery. After all, that sort of problem was Edgar's stock in

trade. She also pleaded that any visit to a school principal's office, even at her late stage in life, had the same effect on her as an attack of Parkinson's disease combined with an acute bladder infection. Doris explained that Miss Whitcolm, the school vice principal, had called her that morning and in no uncertain terms "requested" that one or both parents come to the high school at three P.M. that very day to discuss a serious crime that involved her son Vincent and a considerable amount of missing money.

That afternoon Edgar and Doris presented themselves to the secretary in the high school's general office. Although they were brother and sister, they appeared to be the typical parents of an errant high school student. Doris, drab, short, and plumpish, dabbed at a tearstained cheek and occasionally sniffled a small sniffle. Edgar, tall and gangling, tried to maintain the appearance of the Basil Rathbone version of Sherlock Holmes he so admired, even to the affectation of an unlit meerschaum pipe. His nephew, Vincent "The Tank" Morrison, was already waiting in the outer office.

Much of Vincent's bulk, and there was a lot of it, had not yet matured into muscle. It was

overhanging both sides of the small chair he was sitting in like Nixon's jowls. Snavelly was surprised at seeing Vincent in a clean white shirt and pants that had an actual crease in them. Doris explained that today was the day photographs were to be taken for the school yearbook and that Vincent's neat appearance was the result of a two hour prebreakfast battle. Snavelly was not surprised at Vincent's demeanor, however. It was as unsocial as ever. In fact, Vincent's lower lip was jutting out even more pugnaciously than usual.

It was obvious that Vincent's thoughts were not pleasant ones. Small beads of sweat were showing through his crewcut blond hair and were staining the sides of the shirt that Doris had so carefully ironed. Once again the fates were proving to Vincent that goodness was a loser's trait. Here he was, one of the very few times that he was really completely innocent—well, almost completely—and he was being called on the carpet. What was even worse, that dork Uncle Edgar was going to be his spokesperson. What he really needed now was not a crackpot detective but a good crooked lawyer, or possibly some blackmail information on the vice principal.

Vincent had a very practical mind.

Eventually the trio was ushered into the vice principal's office. The vice principal, Miss Whitcolm, was almost as tall and storklike as Edgar. Her grey hair was drawn tightly into a bun at the back of her head, causing her sharp, prominent features to look like a rubber sheet pulled taut over an axe. For a moment Miss Whitcolm and Snavelly appraised each other over her desk, like two herons preparing for a mating dance.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Snavelly—Mrs. Morrison—you too, Vincent." Years of practice made Miss Whitcolm's request sound like a command. "You realize, of course, this is an unpleasant situation for all of us. It is not enjoyable for me to have to accuse one of our students of thievery."

From her tone, Edgar was not sure that this was the case. Vincent was positive it was not. "I didn't 'do nuthin'," he whined.

"You will have your chance to speak in a moment, Vincent, and I hope with better grammar." Miss Whitcolm tried to make her voice pleasant, but the effort made it come out slightly strangled. "I would like your mother and your uncle to hear what happened from

the person involved. I've asked Mr. Holcum, the physical education teacher, to meet us here. This is his free period."

As if on cue, the secretary poked her head through the door and announced the presence of the gym teacher. Mr. Holcum, better known to his students as Screamer, was a balding man in his late forties, with a slight roll around his middle where muscles used to be. His nickname had been earned by his way of communicating across football fields and basketball courts. In the confines of a small office his voice came out as a loud whisper.

"I've caught you pulling a lot of stupid tricks, Vincent," he rasped. "In fact, if you weren't the only boy in the school over two hundred and fifty pounds, I would have kicked you off the football team long ago. But this—this—"

"I think Mr. Snavelly would like to hear the specifics of the present accusation, Mr. Holcum," interrupted Whitcolm.

"Thank you, Miss Whitcolm," purred Edgar. He was properly proud of his soothing voice. In the past it had defused many an incendiary situation. "I understand that my nephew has been accused of some sort of theft in the school."

"Accused because he was caught redhanded," fumed Holcum. "I caught him myself."

"Would you be so kind as to explain to me exactly what happened?" asked Edgar in his most conciliatory tone.

Holcum calmed down a bit. He took a deep breath while his face went from fire red to a hot pink. "I came in from the football field near the beginning of the second period to pick up something from my office. As I walked into the gym, I saw Vincent at the other end of it, leaving my office and heading for the hall. At first I didn't think too much of it. Sometimes a kid is sent by a teacher to leave a message on my desk, but when I realized that it was Vincent I saw, I thought I'd better check the envelope that was supposed to have my registration money in it. Vincent has a reputation, you know. Well, I was right—the envelope was empty."

"Registration money?" queried Snavelly.

"I am principal of the adult evening school that meets in this building on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Last night was registration night. Usually Mr. Lieber, the day school principal, picks up the money from me that same evening and makes a bank deposit the next day, but he is out of town this week and isn't due to return until tomorrow. Maybe I shouldn't have left the money in my office overnight—" he

stabbed an accusing glance at Vincent—"but that doesn't excuse theft. Anyway, when I realized what had happened, I went immediately to the boys' room, and sure enough there were Vincent and a few of his buddies having a smoke. I grabbed Vincent, but his friends scattered."

"So you recovered all the money?" asked Snavelly.

"All the money?" screamed a reddened Holcum, "None of it! He must have given it to one of his buddies who took off, and now he denies taking it in the first place. Sooner or later Mr. Lieber is going to ask me for the registration money, and I'd better have it, or—or—"

"Now, now," soothed Snavelly. "Before we start giving out punishments, I think it is only fair to hear from the accused."

"I ain't done nothin'," whined Vincent.

"Oh, come now," admonished his uncle. "You were caught in flagrante delicto."

"Huh?"

"To put it indelicately—you were caught with your pants down." Snavelly smiled. "Luckily you were in the boys' room at the time."

"He caught me smoking, but I didn't steal no money."

"Vincent, as your uncle I will believe what you tell me, but I must admit that now I am

tempted to find you guilty and to sentence you to several years in an intensive English class. Now, in carefully constructed sentences, will you tell me exactly and truthfully what happened this morning."

Vincent lowered his head. "Well, there was going to be an English test the first period today, and I wasn't able to study last night 'cause I was sick . . ."

"Vincent, I said truthfully."

"Well, anyways, there was a hockey game on television last night. And anyways, I figured if I left my glasses in my locker this morning I could get a pass to get out of class to get them. Anyways, on the way from my locker, Mr. Holcum comes in and grabs me, and that's all there is to it. I didn't steal nothin'."

"Are you telling me that you were never in Mr. Holcum's office?"

"Now, wait a minute," cried Holcum, "I saw you—"

Vincent stood up. His pudgy hands were clenched in frustrated anger. "I didn't do it," he said as a tear squeezed out of his eye, was temporarily magnified by his glasses, and rolled down his cheek. "I didn't steal nothin'."

Now it was Holcum's turn to stand up. "Vincent, are you calling me a liar?"

"Mr. Holcum," interrupted Snavelly, "I have been a detective for many years, and in my line of work I have found there is often more than one scenario that can be constructed from a single set of facts. If we can all calm down for a moment, I may be able to offer an alternative sequence of events." Snavelly stood up and clasped his hands with the unlit meerschaum pipe behind his back. His head and lower lip jutted forward in thought.

"For the moment, let us assume that everyone here is telling the truth—as he sees it. A process that we in the detective business call deductive reasoning may bring forth an objective truth from a series of subjective statements. Mr. Holcum, I notice that you have a mark on either side of your nose that indicates that you, like Vincent, usually wear glasses. Would I be correct in assuming that you are quite nearsighted?"

"Well, I'm a bit nearsighted, but—"

"And the reason you were returning to your office was to pick up your eyeglasses that you had left there?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"If I may continue with my conjectures. Would I also be correct in assuming that neither you nor Miss Whitcolm

has seen Mr. Lieber since he returned from his convention, a day early?"

"That's true," concurred Miss Whitcolm. A touch of awe was beginning to show in her face. "But how did you know that Mr. Lieber returned early? I just found out about it this morning. The secretary said he had come in before me, closed the door to his office, and left word that he was not to be disturbed until he had caught up with his back paperwork. I will be acting principal until tomorrow."

"I didn't even know he was back," said Holcum, "and I don't want to see him until I get this robbery straightened out."

Snavelly allowed himself a small smile. "Miss Whitcolm, with your permission, I would like to try a little experiment. I am going to describe your principal, Mr. Lieber. I would say he is not very tall—about five feet six or seven. He is overweight, weighing about two hundred fifty pounds. He is either bald or has thin blondish hair. He usually wears a dark suit and black-rimmed glasses. When he comes to work, he takes his jacket off, leaves it in his office, and walks about the school in shirtsleeves."

"That is a very accurate description of our principal," said Miss Whitcolm. "You must

have met him at some school function."

"I have never met the gentleman." Snavelly permitted his smile to take on a superior tinge. "The person I was describing was Vincent as he would have looked from across a large gym to a person who was nearsighted and was not wearing his glasses." A small expression of concern was forming in Miss Whitcolm's eyes. Snavelly continued. "In other circumstances, Mr. Holcum might have assumed it was Mr. Lieber whom he saw entering his office, but he knew the principal was not due in until tomorrow. Later, when he saw Vincent in the boys' room fitting the description of the hazy figure he had seen entering his office, it was quite natural that Mr. Holcum would conclude that it was Vincent he saw leaving his office and Vincent who took the money."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Snavelly. Do you mean to tell me that . . ." Miss Whitcolm suddenly stopped, knitted her brows, and looked at Vincent as if for the first time. Holcum also stared at Vincent and muttered, "Mr. Lieber? Could it have been . . ."

Just then, two sharp knocks were heard on the office door. The door immediately opened just enough for a round, bald

head wearing black-rimmed glasses to pop through. "Sorry to interrupt, Miss Whitcolm, but I would like to see you as soon as you are through here. Oh, and you too, Mr. Holcum. I want to go over the Adult Education receipts with you."

The head withdrew and the door closed even before Miss Whitcolm could say, "Yes, Mr. Lieber."

There was a long moment of thoughtful silence, finally broken by detective Snavelly. "You see, Miss Whitcolm, a bit of deductive reasoning could have saved us all a lot of trouble. Mr. Holcum, I believe you will not have to worry about finding the registration money for your principal. I would guess he already has it. The only problem you may have is explaining to him why you left such a large sum unsecured on your desk." The redness began to return to Holcum's face.

Vincent's eyes widened as the import of Snavelly's deductions slowly penetrated his brain.

"See. I told ya I didn't . . ."

"You are not getting out of this so easily," snapped Miss Whitcolm. She was not in the habit of being caught off balance. No parent, or uncle, was going to usurp her authority.

"You may not be guilty of robbery, Vincent, but let me re-

mind you that you have admitted smoking in the boys' room, and that is a punishable offense in this school. There are some punishments I am permitted to give out, even to football players." She leaned forward. Her eyes glinted with malevolent fire. "Starting tomorrow, Vincent, you will report every afternoon after school to the remedial English class conducted by Miss Furstganger—I believe you students refer to her as The Sandman. You will stay awake long enough to pass her final in May—and I assure you it will be a difficult one—or else you will be off the football team and the only extracurricular activity allowed to you will be singing tenor in the school a cappella choir. Do you understand me, Vincent?"

The horror in Vincent's eyes was all the acknowledgment Miss Whitcolm needed.

Edgar lit his pipe as he, Doris, and Vincent walked across the school parking lot towards his car. "Ah yes," Edgar said as his mind drifted back through the years. "For some people, time seems to stand still. Miss Furstganger was here when I attended this school. She must have been young then, but it didn't seem so to me. She had that same nickname even back then. There was a standing bet that

no one could stay awake in her class for thirty minutes straight."

"It ain't fair," Vincent whined again. "I shouldn't a got no punishment 'cause I didn't take no money, even though I coulda."

Edgar stopped short, and his entourage stopped with him. He slowly removed the pipe from his mouth and stared at Vincent. "What do you mean you didn't take the money even though you could have?"

Vincent's eyes shifted from side to side, looking for an escape route, but the detective's eyes had him pinned like a butterfly to a display board. Like a very large, petulant butterfly.

"I didn't take no money . . ."

"We've already covered that, Vincent," said Edgar icily. "What did you mean when you said you 'coulda' taken the money?"

Vincent saw no escape. "Well, maybe I was in Screamer's office—but I didn't take . . ."

"Vincent—from the beginning. Tell me exactly what happened."

"Well, when I got out of English class, I didn't have no smokes. Everybody knows Screamer smokes, even though he tells everybody not to, and he usually leaves an unopened pack on his desk. So I went into

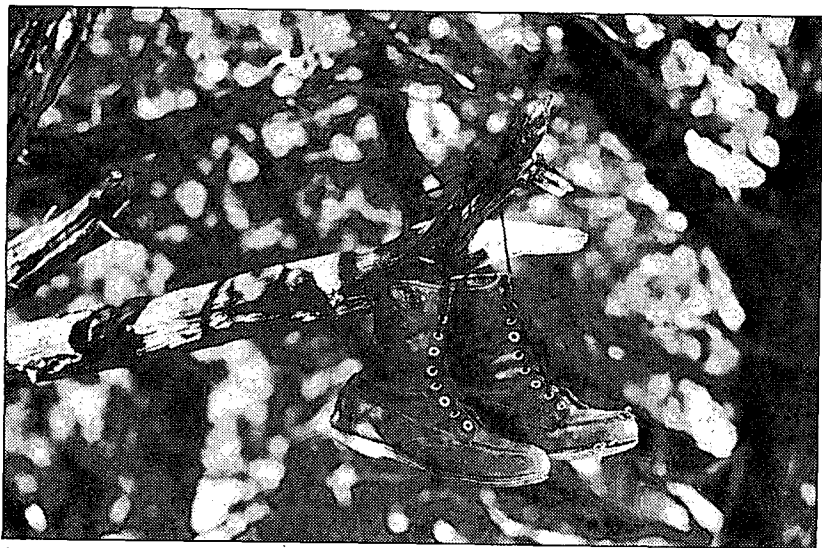
Screamer's officer to get a—er—borrow a cigarette, but then I saw him coming, so I hurried up and took a cigarette and I left."

Edgar's face grew stony. "So it *was* you that Holcum saw coming out of his office. Mr. Lieber must have taken the money earlier. Vincent, for a minute there in Miss Whitcolm's office, I was tempted to complain to her about inflicting an unusually cruel punishment on you, but now I'm beginning

to think it might not have been harsh enough."

The detective angrily thrust his pipe into the corner of his mouth and continued across the parking lot, fuming. "I must remember to put in my memoirs a warning that deductive reasoning is a powerful tool that must be used with great care," he muttered. "I was going to call this 'The Case of the Myopic Mentor.' I think I had better change that to 'The Case of the Perfidious Pupil,' and after I write it, I must remember to tear it up."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Dennis Stock/Magnum Photos

The shoe tree. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

DEATH ON THE DEVIL STRIP

by Dick Stodghill



When a burly stranger, a bear of a man, followed Jack Eddy into the parlor, there was no reason to believe it was the opening scene of a drama in which I would play a starring role, one that would come close to killing me before the final curtain fell. I had been waiting expectantly to see who had rung the doorbell and asked for Jack. In the

nine months he had lived at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street it was the first time such a thing had happened.

From the expression on Jack's face he would gladly have waited another nine. He looked toward me, rolling his eyes as if to say, "Why me?" After motioning the unkempt visitor to an empty chair he said, "Folks, meet Joe Kurtz."

I said, "Hi, Joe, I'm Bram Geary." Our landlord, Bus Bauer, hunched over with his ear close to the stately Grunow console radio that dominated the room, growled a warning that we were interrupting *Amos 'n' Andy*.

Mr. Reimer, the retired drug-gist, nodded tentatively while straitlaced Miss Ferrabee looked Kurtz up and down before grunting, "Humph!" From where he was lying on the floor with the latest issue of *Famous Funnies* twelve-year-old Artie Bauer glanced up at the visitor, saw nothing of interest, and returned to his comic book.

Pudgy Mabel Klosterman giggled, then began a greeting that got as far as "Hell—" before her voice broke.

Miss Ferrabee swung around to face her. "Really, Mabel!"

Undeterred, Mabel wiped away the beads of perspiration that had formed on her upper lip and tried again. "Hello, Joe, I'm Miss Klosterman, but please call me Mabel."

For the life of me I couldn't think of a reason why he'd have need to call her anything. His meaty face looked as if it had spent forty years absorbing one discouraging blow after another, more than a few from the strong right fist of Joe Louis. His watery eyes spoke of past tragedies. Goodwill would have

turned up its nose if offered his lint-speckled overcoat, and what I could see of his suit made my own look like something from Hart, Schaffner & Marx. Both of his socks were blue, but not mates, and the sole of his left shoe was coming apart from the scuffed upper.

After a silence that threatened to become embarrassing he said in a surprisingly gentle voice, "Uh, like I was starting to say, Mr. Eddy, I just wanted to stop by and thank you for steering that case my way. It's been, uh, kind of slow lately, so I appreciate the recommendation."

Jack squirmed uncomfortably. "Think nothing of it, Joe. Anyhow, I wouldn't say I actually recommended you. After I told the lady that Wellington's National Detective Agency doesn't accept domestic cases, she asked if you were reliable, and I said I never heard otherwise."

"Ooh," gushed Mabel, "you're a private detective like Jack!"

As unlikely as it seemed, Joe Kurtz blushed. "Well, uh, I wouldn't say I was in Mr. Eddy's class or anywhere close."

"Now, Joe, there's no need to be modest," said Mabel. "You're among friends, you know."

Miss Ferrabee arose abruptly and left the room.

Joe Kurtz stood up, too. "Well, uh, I'd better be going. Like I said, Mr. Eddy, I just wanted to thank—"

"No need to, Joe," Jack interjected, "no need to."

Mabel followed Kurtz to the door saying, "It's too bad you have to rush off, Joe. Be sure to come back soon."

When she accompanied him onto the porch, coatless despite the frigid January air, I glanced at Jack Eddy. It was the first time I could recall seeing him nonplussed.

I never learned how it came about, but after supper the next evening Mabel Klosterman went up to her room and a short time later came down again all dolled up for a date with Joe Kurtz. I peered out the window and watched them drive off in Joe's battered old Durant coupe that was missing a rear fender and God only knows what else.

When she arrived home a few hours later, Mabel's face was glowing, and not because of the bitterly cold weather that had settled in Akron in the early days of 1938. Joe had taken her to the Rialto, she said, but when Mrs. Bauer asked what picture had been playing, she couldn't remember.

On my way home the next afternoon I saw Mabel coming out of a beauty parlor on East Market Street, her reddish hair done up in curls that made her look like an aged, overfed Shirley Temple. That night when she was ready for another date with Kurtz she was wearing a new dress so tight that I feared something would give way at any second. Mabel Klosterman and tight dresses were never meant for each other, but she flushed with long-awaited delight when Jack Eddy gave a wolf whistle.

A few days later I had finished checking my stories in the first edition when Jack walked into the *Times-Press* city room. What I had written was error-free, but the rest of the world was in distress. The Samoan Clipper had exploded in the air near Pago Pago. A Northwest Airlines plane had crashed in the Bridger Mountains fourteen miles north of Bozeman, Montana, killing everyone aboard. In Toledo an oversized hole in the nipple of a baby bottle had caused a three-month-old girl to drown.

Unaware of all this, Jack smiled and waved to a few people, and gave city editor Ben Goldsmith a cheery greeting. Still it was apparent something was bothering him. He helped

himself to a cigarette from the pack of Spuds on my desk, then as usual perched on a corner of it, one leg swinging back and forth. After flipping his match toward my ashtray and missing he said, "Remember Joe Kurtz?"

"Who could forget him?"

"He's got troubles, buddy. His client's husband was knocked off last night. While Joe was shagging him, or was trying to. The guy gave Joe the slip, then turned up dead an hour later. The big lug found him again about five minutes after the cops arrived at the scene. Now Joe thinks he's the number two suspect on their list."

"Who's number one?"

"His client."

"This happened last night? Then he was working for Milan Jelinke's wife? That was the only murder in town."

Jack nodded absently, taking off his hat and running long fingers through sandy brown hair that was growing thin on top although he was only in his mid-twenties. His usual cockiness was missing.

I said, "Plato Largis is the detective handling the case. He didn't mention a shamus being involved."

Jack answered with a short, derisive laugh. "You're not

green enough to believe he tells you everything."

"So where do you fit into the picture?"

"I don't. That is I don't except that Joe called me and he's all tied up in knots. I'm not responsible, buddy, you know that, and yet I can't help feeling that way."

"You're going soft, Jack. You didn't even recommend him to the woman, just said you hadn't heard he wasn't reliable."

"Hell, friend, I'd never heard of him at *all* until she mentioned his name. After she left, I looked him up in the phone book. He doesn't even have a display ad."

"So what's your problem? Are you out of cases of your own to worry about?"

"Actually we're busier than usual." He stroked his jaw, then shrugged one shoulder. "It's just that the big lummo seems so helpless. You know what I mean, buddy."

I did indeed.

"Then on top of that there's Mabel. She's really gone for him in a big way."

Despite my best effort to bottle it up I burst out laughing. Tough, hard-bitten Jack Eddy, assistant manager of a large detective agency, a man driven by ambition to reach the top and determined to ride roughshod over anyone who got in his

way, was all mixed up over a down-at-the-heels loner and a giddy, love-starved woman with romance on her mind. A less likely cupid couldn't be imagined.

"If you take him on as a client, who's going to foot the bill? Or is Wellington's taking charity cases these days?"

"He says he'll come up with the dough."

"What kind of retainer did he hand you?"

A scowl darkened Jack's angular features. "What's it to you, anyway? You auditing the agency books or what?"

"So you didn't get a cent in advance."

He straightened up and stalked off in a huff. "I haven't even decided if I'll take the case, fella."

"Yes, you have, Jack. You have."

Milan Jelinek was—or had been—a production worker at the Miller Rubber Company. A daughter of the firm's founder had married Thomas Edison. The family, including Edison early in their marriage, lived in a big house on a hill overlooking downtown Akron.

Jelinek had married Sophie Kosla, a sales clerk at Akron Dry Goods. The childless couple

lived in a small house on Lovers Lane, a street running east and west through a working-class neighborhood on the southeast side of town. Sometime in the distant past the name must have been significant to Akronites. During the Great Depression the only lovers seen on Lovers Lane were waiting for a bus headed downtown.

Shots from a slow-moving car had killed Jelinek as he left a South Arlington Street tavern not far from where he lived. He had staggered a few steps toward home, then collapsed on the devil strip. That's how I had written it. Many years later I would learn that only in Akron is the grass between curb and sidewalk called the devil strip.

Arlington is the main north-south thoroughfare on Akron's east side, so there were witnesses. By a count of seven to one they favored a black sedan as the car carrying the shooter. Three said it was a 1937 Terraplane, the others a Buick, Dodge, DeSoto, and Studebaker. One elderly gentleman insisted the shots had come from a crimson Ford convertible.

Plato Largis settled on the Terraplane. The witnesses who identified it as such said it had been parked just north of the tavern and began moving as

Jelinek came out the door. They agreed there had been two men in the car, but none had gotten a look at their faces.

A distinctive teardrop grille made it difficult to mistake a 1937 Terraplane for any other make. The problem was there were dozens in the Akron area, the majority black sedans. On the positive side, the stories indicated Jelinek had been a specific target rather than one chosen at random.

When Jack Eddy left, I returned to police headquarters in City Hall. After running down Plato Largis I said, "You didn't tell me a private eye had been shadowing Jelinek."

"You didn't ask."

"Come on, Plato, it's hardly a routine question. Did you mention it to Tom Kennedy?" My counterpart on the rival *Beacon Journal* would have gloated over a detail I'd missed.

"Up to now I haven't told anyone. How'd you find out?"

"From Jack Eddy."

Largis curled a lip in disgust. "I might have known. It wasn't a Wellington op, so how did he get in on the act?"

"Joe Kurtz called him. He thinks he's a suspect."

"Kurtz is something special. He came charging up about the time I got there. Know what he said? He looked down at the

body and said, 'It's Jelinek. I thought I'd lost him.'"

"How'd Kurtz happen to go to that particular bar?"

"It was Jelinek's hangout. He wasn't much of a drinker, but he'd gotten in the habit of dropping in every day."

"Kurtz drives an old Durant, not a Terraplane."

"What's that prove? The fact is, though, Kurtz isn't on my list. I don't see him as a killer, and I doubt if he could hit the side of a barn with a .38."

"He could have been the driver."

"Whose side are you on, anyway? But I learned something new since I talked to you this morning. Jelinek was laid off at Miller Rubber Company three months ago."

"So? You can find ten laid-off rubberworkers on any street corner in town."

"Right," said Largis, a sly grin spreading over his broad jowly face, "but their wives know about it. Jelinek's didn't."

"How can you keep a thing like that secret? When the money stops coming in—"

"That's the point, kid, it didn't stop coming in. He went off to work every morning, at least his wife thought he did, and came home on payday with his pockets lined."

I had more questions, but a senior detective came up and led Largis away to a private office. When I tried to tag along, the door was slammed in my face.

After supper—Boston baked beans and knockwurst so tender it melted in your mouth—I followed Jack Eddy upstairs to his room. He was still a little sore, but he wasn't a door slammer. I said, "Largis doesn't consider Joe Kurtz a suspect."

"Try convincing Kurtz of that."

"So I was right, you're taking him on as a client."

"Not officially. I told him I'd check around a little. Want to run out to that bar where Jelinek copped it?"

"I was thinking about giving Sue Baney a ring."

"It'll keep, buddy. We'll take your car."

Curiosity won out over female companionship.

The tavern was no different from dozens of others in Akron, a dingy place where rubberworkers drank in silence or argued loudly over union activities. The bartender was younger than most, surprisingly friendly and talkative. When Jack asked if anyone was around who had known Jelinek he said, "Everybody did by

sight. The guy wasn't big on socializing." He looked up and down the bar, then nodded toward a man drinking alone near the rear of the long, narrow room. "Jelinek and Pete back there talked sometimes."

Pete looked us over suspiciously as we approached. "You guys cops? I already talked to one."

Jack signaled for another bottle of Erin Brew for the man. "Not cops, Pete, I'm a private. A buddy of mine had been tailing Jelinek, so now he's a suspect."

"Tailing Milan? How come?"

"His wife thought he was running around."

Pete laughed scoffingly. "Broads, ain't they somethin'? Mine was always accusin' me of playin' the field, then one day she run off with the choir director at church."

I stifled a chuckle. Jack said, "Jelinek had been going out almost every night lately. If he didn't have a tomato stashed away someplace, where was he?"

"Right here most of the time, workin' when he wasn't."

"Working? I heard he was laid off."

Pete nodded, finishing his fresh beer. After Jack called for another Pete said, "Sure, from Miller a few months back. But

he picked up a part-time job right after that."

"Where?"

"At some garage, or maybe a car agency. I mean somebody tells you a thing like that, who remembers exactly? Anyway I'm not sure he ever mentioned the name of the place."

"Was Jelinek a mechanic?"

"Naw, he drove cars to Cleveland."

"Drove cars to Cleveland? What kind of a job's that?"

"One that pays the rent. That's all I know, chief."

Jack tugged on an ear, then gave a shrug of acceptance even though it was obvious he wasn't satisfied. He said, "Any of those witnesses to the shooting here tonight?"

"Ask Freddie."

"Who's Freddie?"

"You were talkin' to him a minute ago. The bartender."

We went to a pair of vacant stools up front. Jack sent still another beer back to Pete and ordered a couple for us. Freddie said "Pete do you any good?"

"A little," Jack replied. "He said Jelinek found a part-time job after he was laid off."

"Right. They'd call him here when they had something for him to do."

"Know who did the calling?"

Freddie shook his head. "They'd just ask for Jelinek, and he never said. Sometimes I

heard enough to know they were telling him when to come in to work."

"Did he leave right away?"

"Once or twice, maybe. Can't say for sure. I think they were telling him what time to come in the next day."

"Anybody around who witnessed the shooting?"

"None of them ever come in here, but I can tell you where to find one. Know that little grocery store in the next block? See the guy who owns it. He lives up the street someplace and walks back and forth a lot. He's been telling everybody he'd just gone past when it happened."

The grocery was still open. The owner wasn't there, but he walked in while Jack was talking to the clerk. His name was Rushton, a mousy little man who turned garrulous when Jack mentioned murder. "It was a narrow escape," he said. "Thirty seconds sooner and they might have got me, too."

"Tell us about it," said Jack.

Rushton couldn't wait. "I had just closed up for the night and was walking home. I noticed the parked car, a Terraplane sedan, because the motor was running. There were two men in front, but away from the street light so I didn't get a real look at them. Anyway, the car started moving as I passed.

Real slow, like they were lost or something. Then I heard the shots and swung around just as they took off fast and turned onto Lovers Lane. This Jelinek was staggering along the sidewalk, reaching out like he was trying to get to something, then fell face down on the devil strip."

"You're sure the car was a Terraplane?"

"Positive. A 1937 model, black. My brother-in-law has one just like it. Sounds like a truck and rides like one."

Jack was deep in thought while we walked back to my car. As I unlocked the door he said, "What I can't figure is this job of Jelinek's and why he was so closemouthed about it. Not broadcasting the details around a bar is one thing, I can understand that, but why keep it a secret from his wife? Above all, why didn't he tell her he was laid off from the rubber company? It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"It shouldn't be, but some men see it as failure on their part. Or it might be he didn't want her worrying."

"Could be, friend. Maybe Jelinek hoped to come up with something to tide them over until he was recalled. In the meantime he didn't want to upset his wife so he kept quiet about the layoff, but then in-

stead of telling her when he did find a part-time job he still kept mum. The only reason I can see for that is he was ashamed of what he was doing, knew she wouldn't approve."

"There's a hundred ways she might have found out he wasn't still at Miller. If she had, explaining where his money was coming from would have been twice as hard. Oh what a tangled web we weave when . . . ouch, that hurt."

Jack had punched my arm just below the shoulder. He said, "Can the recitation, buddy, but keep your ears open downtown tomorrow. This set-up doesn't smell right."

It was still early when we got home, so I called Sue Baney. After picking her up at her Massillon Road apartment, I drove back to Arlington for hamburgers and coffee at the Spotless Spot, telling her the story along the way.

"Poor Mabel," she said when I finished. "It doesn't sound like she's made much of a catch."

"What would you expect, one of Harvey Firestone's boys falling for somebody like her?"

"That's not nice, Bram. Mabel may not be a raving beauty, but she's a sweet person."

"She sweats a lot. And gig-gles."

"I didn't know you were so cold and unfeeling. Some people might not think you're another Fredric March. And what about me? I'm not exactly Claudette Colbert."

"You're better looking than Claudette Colbert. Anyway, comparing you with Mabel Klosterman is like comparing a Rembrandt to a Norman Rockwell magazine cover."

Sue wrinkled her nose. "Personally I prefer Rockwell. But why would the police suspect Mrs. Jelinek? What woman would hire a private detective to follow her husband and then get somebody else to kill him while he's under surveillance?"

"At the beginning a wife or husband is always under suspicion in a murder case. After doing some checking, Largis doesn't think she or Joe Kurtz had anything to do with it."

"Then why is Jack Eddy sticking his nose in?"

"Because Kurtz is worried."

Sue laughed contemptuously. "Who isn't these days? I'll admit one thing, it would be interesting to know why anybody would pay someone to drive cars to Cleveland."

"Car dealers do that. Say somebody wants a green Plymouth coupe and the dealer doesn't have one but another does. They work some kind of deal, or maybe swap cars."

"You can't tell me that happens often enough for a man to make as much money as he did at a rubber shop. For one thing, who's selling that many cars today?"

"Have you got a better answer?"

"I think Jelinek was involved in something crooked and that's what got him killed."

"Could be, I guess. Jack said about the same thing."

Knowing it annoyed me when she turned syrupy, Sue held her upraised arms close to her body and in a Betty Boop cutesy tone said, "Oh goody goody. If Jack Eddy says so, little me-ums must be right." Then, sounding like a drill sergeant: "I wish you'd stay away from that man."

"You're forgetting one thing, Sue. If I hadn't been along on one of his jobs, I wouldn't have met you."

She wrinkled her nose again and gave me one of her pixieish smiles. "For that I'll give the devil his due."

To check the status of the big story in town, one that had been on page one for days, Ben Goldsmith had only to walk to the windows overlooking East Exchange and High streets. In a formidable old mansion on the northeast corner, Miss Augusta

Kaiser, eighty-two, was holding out against all attempts to evict her from the home built in the 1870s by her father, a prominent manufacturer of stoves.

She claimed a fraudulent real estate deal had caused her to lose title to the property. A grand jury had indicted two men for embezzlement in the case, yet a judge ordered her out. The chief deputy sheriff and his men had knocked on Miss Kaiser's door but refused to break it down and put her out in the snow. Akronites cried, "Bravo!"

After reading the latest blow-by-blow account, I skimmed over the rest of the news. Another battle was being fought in Hollywood. Barbara Stanwyck's ex-husband had been granted visitation rights with their young son, but the actress demurred on grounds that she entertained Robert Taylor at the house and didn't want her former hubby hanging around. His lawyers countered with a charge that Taylor had given the boy a fifty dollar check for Christmas and it bounced.

I checked out our competition, the *Beacon Journal*. On page one was a photo of the German freighter S.S. *Crefeld* at a pier in Gibbstown, New Jersey. Bombs were being

loaded for delivery to Japan for its war against China. The bombs had been made by Atlas Powder Works, a subsidiary of Du Pont.

That was enough for one day; I cast the papers aside and went home. What a wonderful world, and such beautiful people.

Mrs. Bauer's roast beef hash was delicious, but supper was a somber affair. I blamed it on romance. Kitty Bauer, vivacious daughter of the household, was in a snit because Jack Eddy had been too busy to take her out since New Year's Eve. Joe Kurtz hadn't been around for several days, so Mabel Klosterman, usually a voracious eater, picked at her food without once raising her eyes from the table.

After dessert, having noted that Mrs. Bauer gave me the smallest piece of angel food cake, I retreated to my room. A moment later Jack Eddy knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an invitation. "I'm going to run out and talk to Milan Jelinek's wife," he said. "Want to go along?"

I had nothing better to do. And was nosy, of course.

When Sophie Jelinek opened the door at the house on Lovers Lane, I was a little taken aback. I had pictured her as a

femme fatale; instead she was a plump but firm woman in a housedress with a faded floral pattern. Her eyes were bright and lively, her black hair shiny in the lamplight.

She said, "Yes?" without enthusiasm, then recognized Jack Eddy, perked up, and added, "Oh, it's you."

He removed his hat. "I'm sorry about your husband, Mrs. Jelinek. Joe Kurtz is all broken up, so I'm lending him a hand. Can we talk a minute?"

"I suppose so. Come on in." She stepped aside so we could enter a narrow hallway with a staircase straight ahead. We followed her into a small living room furnished with inexpensive pieces. Everything was spotlessly clean. It wasn't much of a house, but it received loving care.

Studio portraits taken a decade earlier rested on each side of a mantel above a gas fireplace. Looking out from one was a younger Milan Jelinek, thin with slicked-back dark hair, the sheik look of the twenties.

When we were seated at opposite ends of an overstuffed couch, Jack said, "What gave you the idea your husband was running around?"

Sophie Jelinek hesitated, patting her dark curls and then straightening a doily on the

arm of her chair. "I don't suppose talking about it can do any more harm. The past few months Milan had become withdrawn, very distant. He started going out nearly every night. Sometimes he was late getting home in the afternoon, and he never used to do that. When I'd ask him about it, he was evasive. What else was I to think?"

"He didn't say anything about being laid off?"

"Not a word. It probably seems strange to you, but Milan was that way. Being out of work would have been very embarrassing for him, even with me. Especially with me."

"Why wouldn't he have told you about his part-time job?"

"I don't have an answer. It still would have been embarrassing, I suppose. I would have thought he'd tell me once there wasn't reason to worry about the house payment."

"Don't take this wrong, but had your husband ever been involved in anything illegal?"

"Milan?" She smiled, shaking her head. "For heaven's sake, no. To do that he'd have to have been desperate."

Jack asked a few more questions, none that led anywhere. When we were out in the car again, he said, "One thing doesn't add up, buddy. If Joe Kurtz was shagging him, how

come he didn't tell her Jelinek wasn't going to work in the morning?"

The next afternoon I stopped by the Wellington office in the Metropolitan Building and found Kurtz in a chair in the reception area. He was staring at the floor, nervously twisting the brim of his battered gray fedora in his hamlike hands. Jack Eddy came out from his private office and said, "C'mon back, Joe." He beckoned to me. "You too, Bram."

Kurtz, still mangling the brim of his hat, eased down into the chair beside Jack's desk. I went to another in a dark corner. After lighting a cigarette Jack leaned back, folded his hands behind his head, and said, "You don't need me, Joe. I've talked to Plato Largis, and so has Bram. You're at the bottom of the list of suspects, if you're on it at all. Put it out of your mind."

Joe Kurtz wasn't comforted. His face and eyes brought to mind a bassett hound in one of its unhappier moments. "It's nice of you to say so, Mr. Eddy, but, uh, I'd feel better if you stayed on the case."

"For crying out loud, Joe, there isn't a case." Jack's patience, which never amounted to much, was wearing thin. "I haven't done a thing, haven't

even made out an assignment sheet. Let's just chalk it up as a favor and forget it."

"Well, uh, the thing is I feel kind of responsible. About Jelinek getting knocked off, I mean."

Jack's expression was turning ugly. "Now listen to me, Joe. You were hired to shag Jelinek and report to his wife. Nobody was paying you to be his bodyguard."

"Yeah, but—"

"There're no buts about it. I said to forget it."

"Okay, if you say so. But what about, uh, Mrs. Jelinek? I'd hate to see them pin it on a nice lady like her."

"Nobody's going to. She was on Largis' list at the beginning as any spouse would be. Now she's an also-ran."

"Uh, Joe," I said. Now he had me uh-ing. "What exactly did Jelinek do while you were tailing him?"

"In the daytime he mostly just, uh, kind of hung around downtown. After supper he'd go to that bar on Arlington."

"That was all?" I said.

"Well, uh, this one day he took a ride out in the country, but, uh . . ."

"But what, Joe?" Jack asked agitatedly.

"Well, uh, it's kind of embarrassing. That's why I didn't mention it to the police. You

see my car, uh, it's not in such good shape, so I lost him. Couldn't keep up."

Jack turned away in disgust. Had poor Joe been one of his operatives he would have been out of a job at that point. Jack had lost interest but I was still curious, so I said, "Which way was Jelinek headed when he took this ride?"

"Uh, north. I lost him on the Akron-Peninsula Road. When we got to that straight stretch out past the disposal plant, he put her to the floor. I, uh, well, I couldn't keep up with that Cord he was driving."

Jack looked at him again, frowning. "Cord? You mean that's what Jelinek drove?"

"Well, uh, it wasn't his car. He had a '34 Ford, but I figured he was having trouble with it."

"Why was that, Joe?" I asked. Pulling teeth would have been easier than prying around in his mind for information.

"Well, uh, he dropped the Ford off at a garage, and I figured they loaned him the Cord while they worked on it."

"Where is this place?" said Jack. "I'd like to patronize a shop that gives you a Cord for a loaner."

"Maybe he was, uh, thinking about buying it or something. I mean, I wasn't sure it was a loaner."

"Joe, I asked you where this shop is, remember?"

"Yeah, sure, it's on Front Street up in Cuyahoga Falls. A Hupmobile agency."

"And you thought this laid-off rubberworker might be buying a Cord? Was it one of the late coffin-nose models?"

"Yeah, a bright yellow job."

"Speaking of jobs, Joe," I said, "what did Sophie Jelinek say when you told her her husband wasn't working?"

"Well, uh, I never mentioned that. I mean he could of been on vacation or something." He paused to run fingers shaped like fat cigars through his tousled hair. "Besides, I wasn't, uh, going to report to her till the end of the week."

"Just out of curiosity," said Jack, "what did you do after you lost Jelinek?"

"Went on to Peninsula, but he wasn't anywhere around. I came back to town on Riverview Road but didn't see him."

"Ever think he might have taken Riverview north to Canal Road if he was going to Cleveland? So what did you do when you got back to town, wait for him at that Hupmobile agency?"

"Yeah, how'd you guess? I hung around till they closed up for the day, but he didn't come back."

"When did you pick him up again?"

"Not till the next morning. He didn't show up at the bar that night."

"What was he driving the next morning?"

"His Ford. I thought it was kind of funny at first, then I figured he, uh, beat me back to the garage and was gone by the time I got there."

Jack sighed a long-suffering sigh. "I don't suppose you checked to see if his Ford was still there or not? Well, I guess it doesn't matter. Look, Joe, it's been nice talking to you. I have to get busy now, but keep in mind what I said about being off the list of suspects."

Kurtz left reluctantly. I went out with him to make certain he didn't change his mind. On the sidewalk I turned south when Joe headed north; when he was out of sight, I returned to the Metropolitan Building. When I was seated in the chair formerly occupied by Kurtz, Jack said, "How do you suppose a guy can be that dumb and live as long as he has?"

"You can tell by looking that it hasn't been easy. He's a nice guy, though. I can't help feeling sorry for him. He tries, you have to admit that."

"Sure, and some guys try going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. It's his clients I feel sorry

for." Jack laughed. "He probably gets three or four a year."

"We learned a few things, Jack. First, Kurtz hadn't reported to Sophie Jelinek, so she was telling the truth when she said the first she heard that her husband wasn't working was when Plato Largis told her. The big thing, though, is now we know who Jelinek was driving cars to Cleveland for. It's hard to believe Kurtz didn't tell Plato about that."

"No, it isn't. Nothing's more humiliating than lousing up a tail. What's hard to believe is he told us."

"We'd better let Plato know."

"And get Kurtz in hot water? It's up to Largis to find out, buddy. That's his job, not ours."

"He'll be steamed if he finds out we knew and didn't tell him. If we don't, the next thing we have to do is find out why Jelinek was driving those cars to Cleveland."

"Are you kidding, buddy? What difference does it make?"

"Like you said, something doesn't smell right about the setup. Learning the score will be interesting."

"Forget it, ace. I've already wasted enough time fooling around on this."

"Are you telling me you aren't curious about it?"

"Look, friend, if somebody walks in the door and explains

it to me, I'll probably listen. If you're thinking I'm curious enough to go on my own time to check it out, you're not a whole lot brighter than Joe Kurtz."

“Any particular reason we're going to Cuyahoga Falls?”

Sue Baney asked as we dipped down the hill and crossed the narrow bridge over the river. She made it sound like a long trip when in reality the Falls was just an extension of Akron's north side. At that point the Cuyahoga River told you when you left one and entered the other; at some places a stranger would never have known the difference.

"The agency that Milan Jelinek drove cars to Cleveland for is up here. I want to see what it looks like."

"For yourself or Jack Eddy?"

"Jack's not interested, Sue. He's off the case, if he ever was on it. There's the place up ahead."

As I pulled to the curb on the opposite side of the street Sue said, "That's it? Good grief, Bram, it's a dump. I'll bet they haven't sold a car since Christmas."

She was right. Harry Jett's dealership across from the abandoned Marathon Rubber

Company factory on Front Street reeked of failure. That wasn't remarkable, conditions being what they were in 1938, but the dirty showroom windows showed a lack of trying on Jett's part. It appeared that he was one of many who had finally given up after eight years of battling insurmountable odds.

Three cars were in the showroom, new six- and eight-cylinder Hupmobile sedans and between them a used Dodge. Another dozen used cars were on the lot, most in need of washing. An overhead door opened on a service garage at the rear of the brick building. Beside it were two walk-in grease pits, both filthy. Even the Sinclair gas pump at the curb looked neglected.

Sue did her best to appear interested as I began reciting the history of the Hupp Motor Car Company. Rather than mentioning that I had done a little research at the library, I let her think I kept such information stored in my head.

Bobby Hupp was one of Ransom E. Olds's boy wonders who helped overcome serious problems to put Oldsmobile across to the motoring public early in this century. Like many industrial pioneers, Hupp was eager to have a free hand in the pursuit of fame and fortune, so he

borrowed twenty-five thousand dollars and started his own company. In choosing a name, he followed the example set by his former boss but dropped the final letter of his name in calling the car the Hupmobile.

During the teens and twenties Hupmobile became increasingly important in the automotive industry, one of many small and medium-sized manufacturers that didn't threaten Ford or General Motors but kept them on their toes.

That ended abruptly late in 1929 when Wall Street took its nosedive. That year Hupmobile sold more than fifty thousand cars, in 1930 fewer than eighteen thousand. The company struggled on, producing its most attractive models in the early years of the Depression. People weren't buying, so dealers who until then had been making money found themselves in trouble. Many went under, as did numerous manufacturers in competition with Hupmobile.

In the mid-1930's Hupmobile went a year and a half without building a car. It was a devastating blow to those dealers, Harry Jett among them, who had managed to stay alive during the leanest years of the Depression. Shortly before the stock market crash, Hupmobile had taken over the Chandler

car company in Cleveland and started building its lower-priced cars in the Chandler factory. When I was through playing history professor, Sue said, "Do you think Milan Jelinek could have been picking cars up at the factory and driving them to dealerships?"

"I doubt it. I imagine they use transporter trucks like everybody else. And even if he was, it wouldn't explain why he was driving cars from here to Cleveland unless Jett was wholesaling used cars up there. Obviously he doesn't sell many new Hupmobiles, so where would he be getting decent trade-ins for that? Joe Kurtz said Jelinek was driving a Cord the day he lost him, and Cords don't come cheap."

"You know what I'd do if I were you?"

"What?"

"Tomorrow I'd check the stolen car reports."

Not wanting to sound like a know-it-all, I didn't tell her that was something I had been planning to do.

Cars were being stolen in Akron, but not as many as I would have believed. The majority were cheapies taken by kids out for a joyride, and they turned up again in a hurry. It wasn't that way with the more expensive models. A few were

recovered; most were gone for good.

That didn't tell me much more than I had known to begin with. I had hoped to find a yellow Cord on the list but drew a blank. The result was the same at the Summit County sheriff's office. I drove south to Barberton and checked with the police, then north again to Cuyahoga Falls and did the same. No Cords, yellow or otherwise.

All that driving was getting expensive, so I turned to the telephone for the smaller communities making up Greater Akron. It seemed a waste of time until I talked to someone at the police station in Kent. After explaining what I was after, I said, "Any Cords? I'm looking for a yellow one."

"Alliance."

"Huh?"

"Try Alliance. I got a buddy in the department down there, and he was telling me about a professor at Mt. Union College raising hell because his Cord was stolen."

I thanked him and dialed Alliance. The tip was a good one. "Yeah," said the policeman on the desk, "a bright yellow that'd knock your eyes out. Everybody in town knew it by sight. That's what the guy wanted, he's a big showoff."

"When was it stolen?"

"A week or so ago. I'll check the date for you."

"Don't bother, that's close enough."

So I had something. It seemed likely that by now the yellow Cord was another color and had a new owner. I couldn't wait to get to Jack Eddy's office with the news. When I arrived, he was out, of course.

It was still early, four o'clock. Two hours until Mrs. Bauer would call, "Supper's on the table."

Under a threatening blanket of gray cloud I drove to Harry Jett's Hupmobile agency. A lone salesman was killing the hours staring out the showroom window. He fit the familiar caricature of a used car salesman: flashy sportcoat, pasted-on smile, hint of a cheap cigar on his breath. I was greeted like a long-lost pal.

After we agreed that the weather was cold and commented on last week's snow, the heaviest in eleven years, he said, "Looking for something nice in a used car, are you?"

I nodded, a little annoyed that he had sized me up as a nonstarter in the new car market.

He slapped a front fender of the Dodge on display between the new Hupmobiles. "Here's a

real creampuff. Isn't she a beaut?"

"Not bad. How much?"

"We can work a deal for you on this baby. What're you driving?"

"A '32 Chevy."

The salesman held out his hand. "Gimme the keys and I'll have one of the boys in back take her for a spin around the block, see what he says."

I pretended to look at my watch. "No time right now. Do you do your own servicing?"

He wasn't interested in that end of the business. "You bet. Now if you think this Dodge might be a little rich for your blood, I've got some jewels out on the lot." His hand was out again. "It'll only take a minute for a test run. Let me have your keys, and we'll know where we stand."

If he got his hands on my keys, I knew I'd have to climb up on the roof to get them back. Customers were too scarce to let a live one drive away. "Like I told you, I don't have time right now. Let's take a look at your service area."

He grudgingly led me to a pair of swinging doors and on to the garage. A mechanic was working under the hood of an ancient Hupmobile. That was the only activity. Old parts, mostly junk, were scattered around, and over in a corner a

soft tarpaulin covered everything but the wheels of a long-hooded car. Before the salesman could stop me, I threw the tarp aside, revealing a striking job convertible, a blue and gray job I didn't recognize. I gave a whistle of appreciation. "Now, there's a real doozie. Is that what it is, a Duesenberg?"

In an uninterested monotone my escort replied, "Naw, it's a Reo Flying Cloud, '33 or '34."

"A Reo? I didn't know Reo ever made anything this snazzy. First one like it I've seen. What're you asking?"

"This one's not for sale. It's in for repair."

I could just picture the owner of a car like that bringing it to Harry Jett's dump for servicing, and the mechanics covering it with a tarp. But the Reo was exactly what I'd been hoping to see. I took another look at my watch and said, "Have to run, but I'll try to stop back tomorrow. Got a business card so I can be sure of talking to you?"

"Don't worry, I'll be here." The pasted-on smile had vanished along with the rest of his cordiality.

I was waiting at the front door when Jack Eddy parked his sleek Auburn in front of the boardinghouse. I hurried out to meet him. "Have I got news for

you, Jack. Let's go down to the corner, there's time for a beer before supper."

At the Lenox Cafe the six o'clock shift was stoking up for a night at Goodyear Plant One across the street. We had to take our bottles of Burkhardt's and stand against a wall. Jack was only mildly interested when I told him about the stolen Cord and my visit to Harry Jett's.

"You could be onto something, buddy," he said, "but you're a little shy on proof."

"How many yellow Cords have you seen driving around town? And that Reo was as out of place in that crummy garage as you'd be at a garden club meeting."

"So you think somebody snatched cars off the street, took them there, and Jelinek drove them to Cleveland. Why?"

"To sell, what else?"

"Isn't thirty-five miles a little close? People from here drive up to Cleveland all the time, and vice versa. If you were talking about Fords or Chevys it might make sense, but how long would it be before somebody spotted that yellow Cord and got curious, knowing one like it had been stolen?"

"Then what's your answer?"

"I'm not knocking your idea, buddy, but I'll bet they sell them somewhere else."

"Maybe, but if they sold the Cord in Cleveland, what are the odds against its being spotted? There's a certain amount of risk, sure, but if that was all it took to scare people away from crime, we wouldn't need cops or people like you."

Jack laughed and gave me a punch just below the shoulder, a habit of his that kept my arms black and blue. "Okay," he said, "I concede the point. It never pays to transfer your own logic to the mind of a criminal."

The rubberworkers were starting to drift out the door. Jack finished his beer and deposited the empty on the bar. "Let's go or we'll be late for supper and have Mrs. Bauer in a tizzy." As we headed home along Willard Street he said, "If you're right about this, friend, you're on thin ice. Lay it out to the police in Cuyahoga Falls, let them handle it."

"Without more to go on than I've got? If you were on a case, is that what you'd do at this point?"

I knew the answer even before he said, "That's different."

After stuffing myself on Mrs. Bauer's city chicken and mashed potatoes I called Sue Baney and told her I wouldn't be around that evening. She

took the news with better grace than I preferred.

I parked down the street from the dimly-lit Hupmobile agency. There was no sign of life at the place. Nor was there much life left in me after a couple of hours of sitting there in a cold car. I didn't want to burn gas by keeping the motor running, and even if I had, the heater wasn't much good. By nine thirty I was ready to throw in the towel. By ten my fingers looked like cherry Popsicles, so I drove home, steering most of the way with the palms of my hands.

After standing as close to the radiator as possible for five minutes I climbed the stairs and knocked on Jack Eddy's door. He was stretched out on the bed reading the latest *Black Mask*, warm and comfortable in undershirt and shorts.

"Nothing going on up there tonight," I said.

Jack lowered his magazine. "You had Jett's place staked out? In your car?"

"I was half a block away."

"Any other cars parked along there?"

"No."

"If something had been in the works, you think you wouldn't have been spotted? You're an amateur at this game, friend.

Drop it like I said, or you'll wind up a dead one."

"So how would you have handled it, smart guy?"

"I'd have found a place off the street. If there wasn't one, I'd have parked around the corner and done it on foot."

"It was cold out there, Jack. I'd have frozen on foot."

"That goes with the territory, buddy. Anyway, I think you were there at the wrong time and for too short a time. If you think they're going to move that Reo after dark, you should have spent the night there. But I think they'll do it during the day."

"Why?"

"Don't you remember the Dillinger gang's routine? People figure outlaws move at night in big powerful cars, but that's when the streets are empty and cops notice everything. Dillinger and his boys traveled in the daytime and used inconspicuous cars. At a busy time of day maybe a flashy Reo would be noticed in traffic, but that's all. At night on a deserted street you might as well be driving an army tank."

"That's swell. I have to work most of the day."

"I had the idea you were working out there tonight. Are you trying to come up with a story or just doing this out of idle curiosity?"

"You know I'm after a story."

"Then tell Ben Goldsmith about it and spend the next few days up there; let somebody else cover the police beat. Sell him on the idea that you're onto a big story and you won't have to ask permission to follow it up, he'll insist on it."

He was right, of course. In the morning I laid it out for Goldsmith. He felt as Jack did, it was something I should turn over to the police. It didn't impress him when I said there wasn't enough to go on for that. I played my ace, reminding him there would be no story at all if a visit by the cops didn't turn up evidence for an arrest but scared Jett into shutting down the operation.

"All right, I'll give you a day. Convince me it's worthwhile tomorrow morning, and maybe I'll give you more."

A few cars were parked on Front Street, so I pulled up close behind one on the opposite side of the street half a block from the dealership. It was seven thirty, earlier than anyone was likely to have reported for work, so I walked to the garage at the rear of the building and peered in a window. Despite the grime on the pane of glass and the lack of light inside, I could make out the Reo in the far corner.

Funny it should be a Reo. Bobby Hupp's old boss, Ransom E. Olds, had been squeezed out at Oldsmobile, so he too started another company. In naming the car, he used his initials, REO.

I went back to my Chevy and waited. It was still cold but not as bad as the night before. I was better prepared, too, having put on most of the clothes in my wardrobe.

As the workday began, there was more activity at Harry Jett's Hupmobile agency than at the abandoned factory across the street but not much more. Goodyear had bought Marathon Rubber Company in the mid-1920's, then shut it down early in the Great Depression. The only reminder of what it once had been was a green sign with yellow lettering along the top of the five story building.

My friendly salesman reported for work, then a middle-aged woman who appeared to be an office worker. Two men dressed like mechanics went in a small door beside the overhead one leading to the garage. Later a wiry man of about forty-five parked a new Hupmobile on the lot and hurried inside. He was wearing an expensive gray suit but no overcoat. I had never seen Harry Jett but was certain that was him.

In midmorning an elderly man arrived on foot and a few minutes later came out driving the old jalopy that was being serviced the previous afternoon. Shortly after that a well-dressed man drove a new Hupmobile up to the garage door and honked. When he came out again, he walked north on Front Street toward the small Cuyahoga Falls business district.

That was the extent of the morning's excitement. I wondered how the salesman survived the boredom of his days, but more than that I wondered what I was going to do about lunch. The answer was nothing. By two o'clock I had decided that even if someone offered me a hundred dollars a week I wouldn't trade my job for Jack Eddy's. Not if this was how a private eye spent a goodly share of his time.

I began debating the advisability of going a few blocks north and having a sandwich and cup of hot coffee at Isaly's. My stomach was scoring most of the points. As I reached to switch on the ignition, a stocky man wearing a flat cap and mackinaw turned the corner off Sackett Avenue and went into Jett's garage. That scotched my lunch plans.

Twenty minutes later the garage door rolled up and out

came the Reo, the recent arrival behind the wheel. He was twenty-eight or thirty, a thin-lipped man with narrow eyes set too close together. A two-bit thug if I ever saw one. As he headed north on Front Street, I fell in behind.

At the business district the Reo turned left at Portage Trail. I barely had time to make the light. That scared me, so I hugged his rear bumper until we were past the remaining lights and the road narrowed to two lanes. After the hill at Fourteenth Street there was nothing but vacant land on both sides, so I eased up, allowing a fair amount of space to open up between us.

When he reached State Road, Route 8, the driver of the Reo had two choices, continuing straight ahead and following the Cuyahoga Valley to Cleveland or turning right onto the state highway. He turned right. After going down a dip and passing the Old Mill we were on a brick highway with room for three cars side by side.

The suicide lane in the middle always had an adverse effect on my nervous system. Not so with the man ahead. I didn't know what was under the long hood of the Reo, but it enabled the driver to make a mockery of any speed limit. He passed cars and trucks with little re-

gard for his own safety and even less for mine. He always seemed to have a clear shot at the center lane, but when I'd try to pull out to keep pace, someone coming the other way would beat me to it.

Along with that, my Chevy made frightening noises and developed a nasty shimmy when the speedometer climbed above sixty-five. The highway narrowed to two lanes of black-top at Boston Heights, but by then the Reo was long out of sight.

On the way home I stopped at Harry Jett's agency, avoiding the salesman by going in the garage door. Both mechanics were busy, didn't even bother to look up as I entered. Someone else had been busy during my absence: a late model metallic green Packard sedan was in the space previously occupied by the Reo.

Explaining my day to Jack Eddy didn't prove as difficult as I'd anticipated. The boarding-house at 38 Dudley Street was quiet for a change, and we had the parlor to ourselves. The only activity was in the kitchen where Mrs. Bauer was busy preparing supper. The fragrance of pork and sauerkraut drifted our way. My stomach rumbled in anticipation.

"I'm to blame, buddy," said Jack. "I should have realized your bucket of bolts couldn't keep pace with a hot car like that and said something."

"It's a good car, Jack. At seventy-five it purred along like a kitten."

"I'll bet. Like a kitten with somebody standing on its tail. Tomorrow we'll swap cars, give you a fighting chance."

Sue Baney was less understanding. She sipped a chocolate soda at the big Isaly's on East Market Street while I told her the story between bites of a banana split.

She said, "And now you're going to use Jack Eddy's car so you can be just as childish as that other driver? Honestly, Bram, you must be losing your mind. Does Ben Goldsmith know about this? I can't believe he'd allow it."

"I called him at home after supper. He thinks I'm onto something good. I'm free to work on it the rest of the week if I have to."

"All newspapermen are fools. Do you know Charlie Klein?"

"Chuck Klein, the Phillies outfielder?"

"Of course not. The man who works at my office."

"That mealy-mouthed guy you introduced me to a few months ago? What about him,

what's he got to do with anything?"

"He asked me out to dinner Friday night, and I think I'll accept. It would be a nice chance to spend time with someone who leads an ordinary life, a mature person who thinks there's excitement enough in pleasant companionship and everyday pastimes. There *are* men like that, you know."

"Now look, Sue, I'm just doing my job. If you'd rather spend your time with some timid little squirt, it's your funeral. But you'll be sorry."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. I meant it might spoil things for us."

"So would having you in traction at City Hospital. Or how would you like me to spend the rest of my life sitting home alone and taking flowers to a cemetery on Sunday? If you think that's my idea of living, you really are crazy."

"Okay, go out to dinner with your Mr. Milquetoast."

"All right, I will." She stood up and started toward the door. "And you don't have to drive me home, I'll walk."

I overtook her, convinced her that walking would be foolish. Or maybe it was the wind and flakes of snow swirling in the air. Whatever, she accepted a ride but pulled away when I tried to kiss her goodnight,

slammed the door behind her, and went into her apartment building without a word.

I drove home wondering what life would be like in the French Foreign Legion.

The timetable was like the previous day's. When the same plug-ugly headed north in the green Packard, I had no trouble keeping up. I might have done the job on a bicycle because this time he drove as sedately as an elderly woman making her weekly run to the grocery in a Baker Electric. After a few miles I decided Milan Jelinek's replacement had been warned about his driving habits. His getting a speeding ticket wouldn't make his employer happy.

The Packard continued north through the eastern suburbs to Mayfield Road, then west toward downtown Cleveland. As we approached Murray Hill in the neighborhood known as Little Italy, it turned in at an auto agency that was a far cry from Harry Jett's. The immaculate showroom was large enough for six cars. Another twenty or so were displayed on the lot. All of them, both inside and out, were high-priced models from the previous few years and looked as though they had come straight from the factory.

I went on by, parked well down the street, and returned on foot. The area brought one thing to mind, the Murray Hill Mob, an important cog in the unsavory element of society that people were just beginning to call organized crime.

Average citizens thought the name referred to a nationwide network of criminals, for the most part Italian, Irish, and Jewish ex-bootleggers who had branched out into many fields. They were right, of course, but there was a second and equally important definition. The Murray Hill Mob and others like it were organizations that included specialists in every aspect of criminal activity. Aside from the hierarchy, the majority worked at everyday jobs until their skills were needed.

If plans called for holding up a jewelry store, it was cased in advance by an expert. A phone call alerted men ready to steal a car whenever one was needed. They didn't pick one at random but had selected cars in mind, ones parked in factory or office lots. Day or night they could on short notice deliver a cheap, mid-range, or expensive model and know how many hours would elapse before it would be missed and reported stolen. Specialists in armed robbery would take over from there; then someone else would

dispose of the loot. A paymaster distributed the proceeds, most of which remained with the men on top.

These were the men who controlled gambling, the numbers racket, prostitution, drugs, after-hours sale of liquor, any other illegal but lucrative activity. They also made money on legitimate businesses that served as fronts for their real interests. Once such an operation was in place, there could be power struggles within and territorial warfare with other gangs, but while law enforcement agencies might chip away at the edges or occasionally nail one of the big boys, bringing the organization down was all but impossible.

As I approached the car lot, I was thinking of the members of the gang whose specialty was killing on command. I wasn't in friendly territory.

By pure luck my timing was ideal. A transporter truck was being loaded, and among the three cars already aboard was the familiar Reo Flying Cloud. Failing to include their destination would leave a gaping hole in my story, but I wasn't keen on setting foot on the agency lot. For a few minutes I lingered indecisively on the sidewalk.

Someone was checking out the radio in a Lincoln Zephyr

parked in the front row. The Larry Clinton band, a favorite of mine, was swinging one of the new hit tunes, "I Double Dare You." As Bea Wain warbled the lyrics, she seemed to be taunting me: I double dare you to step over here.

So I did. As far as I could tell, no one was paying the slightest attention to me. Even the inevitable salesman was nowhere to be seen. While the driver was securing a sporty Chrysler convertible on the transporter tracks I said, "Some real beauties on this load. Where're they headed?"

Without turning from his work he replied, "Baltimore."

There wasn't anything more I could hope to learn, so I went back to Jack Eddy's Auburn, as goodlooking a car as any on the dealer's lot. Rather than taking the same route home I followed Woodhill, East 93rd, and Warner Road to the Cuyahoga Valley, then Canal Road to Riverview. Once I had left the congested area behind, I had a relaxing ride through beautiful wooded countryside laced with rugged ravines, precipitous cliffs, and towering glacial rock formations. Only rarely did an approaching car disturb my thoughts.

I was going to have to talk to Harry Jett. Not alone if I could help it, so various ways of lur-

ing Jack Eddy into going along were flashing through my mind when a speeding car appeared in the rear view mirror. It swung out to pass me on a deserted section of road, then suddenly slowed to my speed and cut me off. Alarmed, I swerved to the right and bumped along the berm until I was able to stop the big Auburn just short of the ditch.

The offending car screeched to a halt ahead of me. Two men got out and walked back. I was thinking they wanted to see if I was all right until I saw that one was the driver I had followed to Cleveland and the other had a gun in his hand. I knew I was in trouble but didn't realize how much until they ordered me out of the Auburn and I was frog-marched to their car, a black 1937 Terraplane sedan.

The man with the gun shared the back seat with me as we finished the drive to town. He was about six inches shorter than I, probably five nine, and as skinny as a hamburger at Ptomaine Tommie's. An unruly shock of black hair kept falling over one eye, and he'd toss his head to get it back in place. I asked a couple of questions but was given the silent treatment. As I anticipated, we followed the shortest route to Front Street and turned in at Harry Jett's Hupmobile agency.

When the overhead door went up and we drove into the garage, my hope of leaving alive was dim indeed.

It was after five; the employees had gone home. Only the man I had earlier decided was Harry Jett remained to welcome us. I was pushed down onto a wooden chair, and he began firing questions at me, all relating to who else knew what I was doing and where I was at the moment.

Jett wasn't as well informed as I would have believed. He was surprised to hear I was with the *Times-Press* and wasn't aware that Joe Kurtz had been tailing Milan Jelinek. He wasn't happy to learn that Kurtz knew of Jelinek's connection to himself, and above all that Wellington's National Detective Agency was involved.

He was a novice at the game, a petty criminal who had gotten in over his head. Like an animal backed into a corner, he was confused and struck out wildly without regard to consequences. When he looked at the man with the gun and nodded toward the Terraplane, his message was obvious. There seemed little point in it, but I stalled for time by asking a question of my own: "Why did you have Milan Jelinek killed?"

He had every reason to believe his answer wouldn't be repeated, so after only a momentary pause he said, "Jelinek had a big nose, and he got greedy."

"I don't get you."

"Instead of being grateful for having a job, he started thinking too much. He wasn't as dumb as I thought and figured it all out, then wanted more money."

"Figuring it out would have been easy. There must have been more to it than that."

"He got on the wrong side of certain people. The last time he drove to Cleveland for me, he nosed around and found bullet holes in a car he had driven up earlier. The car wasn't anything special, a Cadillac sedan not worth shipping out, but it was stashed away where nobody should have seen it. Jelinek did, put two and two together, and decided it fit the description of one used in a bank job in Lakewood."

"The one a few weeks back when there was a shootout and a bank guard was killed?"

"Right. I had nothing to do with that, but the people up there were upset, told me to get rid of Jelinek. They meant permanently, and you don't argue with their kind."

He was enjoying the role of bigshot, so I kept asking ques-

tions. "Why did you hire Jelinek in the first place?"

"We're a small operation, and the boys here are busy with other things. Having some down-and-outer do the driving made sense at the time. I had a cover story worked out in case he got picked up along the way."

"Why bring the cars here instead of taking them straight to Cleveland?"

"So we can clean them up, get more money that way."

"You mean you just sell them at Murray Hill? You're not part of the Cleveland setup?"

"Me? I don't speak their language. I managed to struggle along until Hupmobile quit building cars for better than a year; then it was either branch out or go under. The boys here line up a car, then I call and see if they're interested in Cleveland. If they are, we pick it up."

"So until you killed Jelinek, you hadn't done anything more than steal cars. Pretty stupid, wasn't it? One squeeze of your boy's trigger finger, and you jumped from petty criminal to capital offender. All that and it still leaves you a minor leaguer trying to play with the big boys."

The truth was upsetting. He looked to his hired gunman again and said, "Get him out of here."

"Kill me and it'll double your chances of getting strapped in the hot seat. If I don't make it home for supper, you'll be behind bars before midnight."

Jett was frightened, but he had his mind made up and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I was hustled back into the Terraplane, the man with the gun at my side again.

Jett raised the overhead door, and we started off to some lonely place free of prying eyes. But before we got to the street, the driver hit the brakes as a car off to the side suddenly shot forward and blocked the drive. I may have been more surprised than anyone because the car was my own.

I saw Jack Eddy leap out and without looking knew the man beside me had jumped from the Terraplane. I turned to see him level his gun, but Jack had one, too, and he was first to fire. The thug spun halfway around and hit the ground hard. His own shot, wide of its target, made a pinging sound as it struck metal. I got out fast, jerked the gun from his hand, and looked up in time to see Harry Jett run back inside the garage.

I tossed the gun into the nearest grease pit and sprinted after Jett. He was twice my age and out of shape, so it was no contest. I brought him down with the best tackle I had made

since nailing a Central High all-city halfback for a five yard loss while playing end for East.

Now it was my turn to frog-march someone. When we got to the door, I pulled up short, mouth agape. The Chevy, mine for only a month, was in flames. Jack Eddy was dragging the downed man away from the fire with one hand, the other holding the gun on the Terraplane's driver.

"What happened, Jack?"

"This mug hit your gas tank, and I had just tossed my cigarette on the ground. I hope your insurance is paid up."

In the distance I could hear a siren, then another much closer. The Cuyahoga Falls fire station was only a couple of blocks north, but if it had been in the same building, the firemen couldn't have saved my car.

The police arrived close behind the fire engine; then came an ambulance from the Weller Funeral Home next door to the firehouse. The gunman, his shoulder ripped up by Jack's bullet, was quickly loaded onto a stretcher. Everything happened in such rapid succession that it was a little overwhelming.

Jack Eddy said something I didn't catch. I said, "Huh?"

"My car, dammit. Where is it?"

"Out in the valley. Riverview Road."

"Wrecked?"

"It's fine, Jack, just fine."

He exhaled audibly. "Lucky for you, sport."

Luckier, though, that he had shown up when he did. I said, "How'd you happen to be here, Jack?"

"I got curious and decided to come out and see how you were doing. You were nowhere in sight, but about ten minutes after I arrived you came riding up in that Terraplane."

"How'd you happen to have a gun? You hardly ever do."

"Just a hunch. It paid off."

"It sure did. I'm glad you got here when you did."

"That makes two of us. Otherwise, how would I have found my car? No telling what might have happened to it. It might even have ended up in Harry Jett's pipeline to Cleveland."

One thing about Jack Eddy, there were times when you couldn't tell if he was serious or just kidding around.

We were late for supper. Missed it, in fact. After hearing about the shootout and all that went with it, Mrs. Bauer said, "Well, you could at least have taken time to call and let me know you wouldn't be here."

On the way into the house we had barely escaped being tram-

pled by Mabel Klosterman as she rushed out to meet Joe Kurtz at the Rialto. After our session with Mrs. Bauer, Jack went into the parlor and pulled Kitty up from her chair. "Powder your nose, kiddo," he said. "I'll grab a sandwich somewhere, and then we're going out on the town." Romance had returned to the boardinghouse.

I changed out of my dirty clothes and started the lonely walk to the Coney Island Lunch, then turned and went back and dialed Sue Baney's number. When she answered, I said, "I missed supper; so I'm going out to get a bite. I was wondering if you might want to go along? The thing is, I don't have a car, so we'd have to meet somewhere on the bus line."

"What's wrong with your car, Bram?"

"It's out of commission."

"You mean it's in the shop again? You bought a lemon."

"It's not in the shop. It burned up."

"What? What have you been up to now, Bram? Don't tell me over the phone, I want to hear this in person. I'll meet you down by the corner at the New Era Cafe."

She listened to the story, but instead of delivering the expected tirade she didn't say a word, just kept shaking her head. Her only comment, when

it finally came, was "So Milan Jelinek's wife was wrong. He was a crook like the others."

"I don't think so. Not like the others anyway. His problem, what got him in trouble, was he loved his wife. That witness to the shooting said it looked like he was reaching out for something as he fell on the devil strip. I'll bet he was reaching out for Sophie."

"That's sad, but I'm not sure I understand."

"Jelinek was scared. Not for himself, for Sophie. He couldn't bear the thought of losing the house, knowing how much it meant to her. A lot of men are in the same fix today, but no matter how hard they try, the opportunity to do something about it never comes along. For Jelinek it did." My mind was busy as I ate the last bite of cherry pie. "When you think about it, Harry Jett wasn't much different. He has a big house in Silver Lake and probably was afraid of losing it along with everything else."

"A lot of people with big houses in Silver Lake can't afford to pay the paperboy. I don't sympathize with them, it's those like Jelinek and his wife I feel sorry for."

"All kinds of people have been hit by this Depression, Sue. Conditions are a lot better since Roosevelt was elected,

but I wonder what it's going to take to end it once and for all?" I didn't mention a conviction that had been building in my mind: a big war would end it.

For a while we sipped coffee in silence. Eventually I said, "Are you still going out to dinner with that creep?"

"He isn't a creep, he's a nice person."

"Okay, so are you going out with that nice person?"

"No. I told him maybe some other time. But that doesn't mean I've forgiven you for the things you said or that I've changed my mind." Without the least warning she started crying. It was a first, and I didn't know what to do. After a minute or so she said, "Oh, Bram, you really are a silly fool. I wish I didn't care about you, but I do."

That was all that mattered. I felt much better.

Ben Goldsmith wasn't overly pleased. He lectured me on the role of a reporter, telling me to keep myself out of the story. He said a reporter observes and reports, he doesn't participate. One more thing Harry Jett hadn't been aware of.

Jett and his pair of thugs faced murder charges. The triggerman hadn't even had the sense to get rid of the gun he used to kill Milan Jelenik. All

of them were afraid to talk, however, knowing the result if they did. My testimony would be hearsay, and what I had seen in Cleveland was meaningless. The Murray Hill people were in the clear.

Miss Augusta Kaiser, though, had been granted a reprieve from eviction until the weather warmed up in April. She would lose in the end, of course, but nearly everyone does.

For the second time in little more than a month I started making the rounds of the used car lots. At the last of them I recalled how Sue Baney often said I was too easily influenced by my surroundings and experiences. Perhaps she was right. Listening to polkas on the radio—they filled the airwaves in northeast Ohio—made me gay and lively, but five minutes of wailing violins on *The Hungarian Hour* and I was ready to end it all. I'd pick out something on a menu; then, when Sue ordered, that sounded better than my selection so I'd switch. And one afternoon I drove home in a four-year-old Hupmobile sedan with a sloping grille and oval headlights. The body was an eye-catching olive green, the fenders black. I hadn't bought it at Harry Jett's place, of course.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

Six couples, including one from South Dakota, assembled in the strange little village of Goombali, where they were to meet their guide and start their safari. The wives came along for the adventure, but the men were there for different motives: the geologist hoped to find traces of a legendary gold mine; the engineer hoped to locate a suitable site for a power dam; the contractor wanted to talk the Mambuti chief into building a modern city; the journalist wanted authentic background for his great African novel; the lawyer sought to find the heir to a fortune who had disappeared somewhere in Mambutiland the previous year; and the hunter was after a trophy lion. Chet was especially excited.

Before any of them attained his goal, tragedy struck.

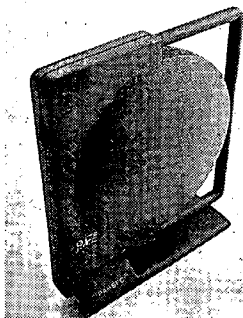
- (1) As their safari guide, Jan McCann, looked over his list and checked off names, he remarked, "This is odd. Six couples and no husband and wife have the same first-name initials. I see that Amos isn't married to Alice, Bart to Betty, and so on." He chuckled, "I hope *you* can keep the names straight. Let's go!"
- (2) Dan, Earl, and Fred (who included the journalist and contractor) gallantly helped their wives into the Land Rover driven by the guide. Mrs. O'Dell, Ellen, and the lady from Virginia settled into the second vehicle beside their husbands.
- (3) At the first stop, Dan, Mr. Nader, and Flora's husband discussed their particular professions: journalism, contracting, and law.
- (4) At lunch everyone became less formal. Bart, Clara's husband, and the lawyer were no longer addressing one another as "Mr. Paris," "Mr. Queen," and "Mr. Reade." In fact, the three men were soon laughing so much that Fred asked, "Hey! What's so funny? May I join you?"

- (5) After lunch, the couples from Utah, Virginia, and Texas stretched out under an acacia tree, while Fred, Mr. Maris, and the hunter wandered off into the veldt. Ellen decided the sun was too hot, and remained in the shade with her husband.
- (6) Shortly before sundown, Jan McCann stopped the leading Land Rover and announced, "This spot is as good as any. We'll camp here for the night." Mr. Queen, the man from Tennessee, and the geologist pitched the tents. Watching them, Doris said to Ellen and Flora, "Don't you wish our husbands had that much energy?" Earl was content to sit by the campfire, too tired from the long ride to be pitching any tent. Two other men kept him company.
- (7) Later, Alice said goodnight coyly to Bart and the man from Utah, and disappeared into the tent of her husband.
- (8) The following morning, around daybreak, Earl helped the man from Wyoming and the contractor in building a fire to cook breakfast. Although two of them were unaware that anything was amiss, during the night the third had murdered someone in the safari group.
- (9) Suddenly a woman's voice screamed, "My husband! He's missing!" The search began. Minutes later, Mr. Reade and the man from Texas stumbled across the victim and carried his body back to the camp site. He was dead from a blow to the back of his skull. The body was cold.
- (10) The killer had fled during the commotion. Mr. Nader and Doris's husband joined the safari leader trying to track the killer down.

Who killed whom on the ill-fated safari?

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

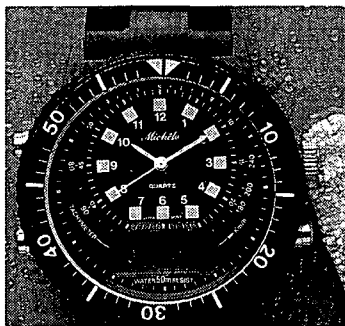
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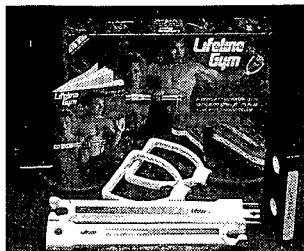
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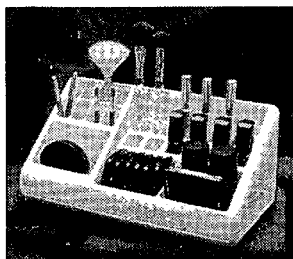


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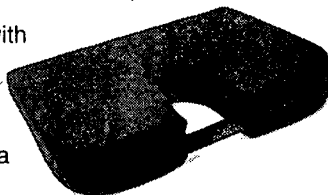


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Was It Guru For You, Too?

by Laurel McClimans



"Nikki dear,"
Cousin Fidelia
oozed in her
sweet Southern way, "before
the guests arrive, I think you
should know I told George

someone is trying to kill me."
When I didn't respond to her
news, Fidelia asked, "Don't you
want to know why I told him
that?"

I didn't, but I knew I'd save

time if I pretended I did. I looked up from the party's checklist. "Okay. Why did you tell George someone is trying to kill you?"

"It was Ricardo's idea. My new spiritualist. I'm really very tired of everyone thinking George married me for my money. This will finally put an end to such talk."

"How?"

"I certainly can tell you're from the Yankee side of the family. Sometimes, Nikki dear, you really are quite thick." Fidelia ran a manicured fingertip along the frame of the Audubon, checking to see if the cleaning staff had done its job, and if I had done mine by telling them what to do. "If George did marry me for my millions, by telling him I feel someone is trying to kill me, I've given him the perfect opportunity to do me in without having suspicion cast upon himself."

"How?"

"Because he'd think whoever wanted to kill me would get the blame instead of him." Fidelia turned from the painting. "I think the idea is brilliant."

"I think it's stupid. And dangerous."

Fidelia hoisted her nose into the air. "Ricardo's plan is not stupid. And as far as being dangerous . . . precious George

loves me, so I'm not worried in the least."

Not that I cared, but I asked anyway. "What exactly did you tell George?"

"I told him for the past few days I've noticed a man following me whenever I leave the house. I also told him yesterday that same man tried to run me off the road."

"And what did precious George say to that?"

"He called me his Poor Baby and asked if I wanted to call the police. Does that sound like a man who loves my money more than me? I think not." With that, Fidelia exited to the verandah in a flurry of flowing silk.

Fidelia and her loony ideas; I had endured more than my share of both. To be charitable, Fidelia wasn't totally at fault for being the way she was. Her now deceased mother had been born with the face of a movie star and the brain of a pea. Her equally dead dad had had more money than Rhode Island. Put that all together and you get a beautiful somebody who's rich as Croesus with the common sense of doorknocker. And a snout to boot.

Which didn't automatically qualify her for a coffin, but since George had been given the opportunity, I wondered if he *would* try to knock her off.

It amazed me someone hadn't done it long ago; almost everyone who came in contact with Fidelia had cause.

Personally, I don't condone murder, no matter whose. But having Fidelia out of my life—I smiled at the thought. A really big smile.

"Nikki 'dear," Fidelia called from the verandah, "I'd like you to meet my guest of honor and new spiritualist, Ricardo Mystic."

Mr. Mystic was balding, bearded, and looked like he should be playing clarinet for a cobra.

"And this is his lovely wife, Lavada."

Lavada had hair the color of apricots and enough junk jewelry to start her own carnival. She also had a set of soccer balls that would make several cows I know udderly jealous.

"And this is Ricardo's number one assistant. I'm sorry. I didn't catch his name."

"Our universe doesn't believe in names for underlings," Ricardo replied. "Because he's Assistant Number One, that's how I refer to him."

The way Lavada devoured Numero Uno with her eyes, I had a hunch she looked upon him as Number One in ways other than spiritual. Sun-streaked hair and a toothy

smile can do that to some women.

Fidelia finally got around to introducing me. "Everyone, this is Nikki O'Shea, my house manager. Nikki dear, please inform Mary she's forgotten the cream again. I honestly don't know why I keep that girl. And Nikki dear. Please ask George to join us. Ricardo would like to meet him before the other guests arrive. And Nikki dear. Shape up that attitude. Remember, if it weren't for me, you'd be unemployed."

Every time Fidelia gave me an order or a rebuke I imagined her standing there in a big ol' hoop skirt with a parasol in one hand and a bullwhip in the other, sort of like Miss Scarlett. A Terras County, Florida, version of Miss Scarlett.

As I rounded a corner on my way to the kitchen, I collided with George. Like a magnet, his hands clamped onto my can.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Adder. Mrs. Pickney-Adder desires your presence on the verandah." Standing so close, I could count every enlarged pore on George's nose. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"You're doing it."

"Is there anything else?"

"Oh, I bet if we put our bodies together, we could come up with something. Around nine?

Her Highness has a date with her new guru tonight."

"Where'd she find this one?"

"Mary introduced them. So what about tonight? Feel like giving the mattress a workout?"

"I'll be waiting with hot, bated breath."

So now you know. For several months I had been sleeping with my cousin's third husband. Having possession of something of Fidelia's—even temporarily—gave me much pleasure, which was more than George did. What a snake.

Now before you go off and think I'm an immoral witch, I just want you to know I only diddled with George because I wanted to spite Fidelia. It had nothing to do with thinking he'd dump her and marry me. Guys with less in the bank than I do don't turn me on, and without Fidelia's money that was exactly what George had. And that's all George would ever have, unless Fidelia died before he did. It said so in their prenuptial agreement. Fidelia's hormones may have chosen her mates but her lawyer looked after her money.

And since we're on the subject . . . I, too, was in Fidelia's will. But in order for me to inherit, Fidelia's current husband—George or whoever—had to croak when she did. And

really, how likely was that? About as likely as my winning Lotto, that's how likely, which was why I felt absolutely no remorse about doing the Serta Samba with her husband.

I entered the kitchen. Mary stood in the center of the room at the butcher block, hacking the heck out of a stalk of celery. She did that sort of thing a lot whenever George had been around. It's amazing how much force a petite woman can put behind a big knife.

Keeping a safe distance, I said, "Mrs. Pickney-Adder requests a vessel of cream."

Mary tucked a strand of blonde chin-length hair behind an ear. "Yes, miss."

"Please don't call me that." I grabbed a mangled stick of celery.

"Sorry, miss," Mary said, crossing the room to the work table. "Habit."

I leaned against the table while Mary finished arranging canapés on a silver platter. Each canapé contained my yearly allowance of fat grams.

Between bites of celery I said, "The party decorations look fabulous. You really outdid yourself this time."

"Thank you, miss."

"Seven to one Fidelia takes credit for them. Like always."

"It's her right. She's my employer."

"You sure are a lot more tolerant than I'd be. If I were you, I'd have told her where to shove it and how high a long time ago."

Mary bowed her head and smiled shyly. "That's not my way."

As we headed for the verandah, with canapés and cream, we passed the open doors of the library. Inside, Mrs. Mystic and Numero Uno sat on the love-seat, engaged in close conversation. Lavada had her hand on Uno's knee. He had his eyes on her behemoth boobers.

When we got to the verandah Fidelia was holding court.

"Fidelia, you're amazing," one of her acquaintances gushed. "Every month you have a spectacular party, every month the theme is unique, and always the decorations are glorious."

"Wynona, you're embarrassing me."

"I love the intricate games that are such a special part of your parties," another woman said. "I love the way because of one thing something else happens, which makes something else happen, which makes . . . How does your little brain come up with such marvelous ideas?"

While Mary rearranged the serving table, I fumed. "Will you listen to that! Those women should be oohing *you*.

You create those games and decorations. How can you just stand there and let Fidelia take the credit?"

"All good things come to those who wait." Again Mary bowed her head and smiled shyly. "I'm sure I'll get my due eventually."

Fidelia's gala ended around five. Although my job description didn't include picking up after parties, as I ambled through the house I collected a champagne glass here, a crumpled napkin there. Approaching the open kitchen doorway, I heard Mary talking to Numero Uno.

"Life is a sequence of events, sweetheart, and each sequence takes time."

"But what about Lavada?" Uno asked. "I don't know how much more of her I can take."

"Ricardo and Lavada won't be in our lives forever."

"But I want to be with you."

"You will be. Just keep suggesting to Lavada what I say. Everything you whisper in her ear winds up in Ricardo's brain and out his mouth. And that means in time we'll get what we want."

As I stood there eavesdropping, George came up from behind. Something was up. He didn't steal a feel.

"I won't be able to make it at nine tonight. Will your breath still be hot around twelve?"

"My breath and a few other things." I knew that kind of talk made him giddy. It made me nauseated.

At a quarter of eight Fidelia left for her rendezvous with Ricardo. I dismissed the staff soon after, including the chauffeur; Fidelia had gone solo to her session. That done, I retired to my room. Jay Leno was making me giggle when the doorknob jiggled around midnight.

"Nikki, open up. It's me."

I flung on my robe and let the reptile in.

"I did it, Nikki. I did it." George tittered with giddiness, but I hadn't said anything yet, clean or dirty. "I killed Fidelia. With a rope. Around her neck. After the session. On the way to the car. If she hadn't given me the idea, I never would have tried it. And the cops'll never suspect me. They'll go after that other guy. The one she said was following her."

While he rambled on, I tried to think. He *actually* had done it. I wouldn't have put it past him, but to actually have *done* it.

I asked, "What'd you do with the rope?"

"They'll never find it. I tossed it in a Dumpster next to Burgerville on Third Street. I pitched her purse, too."

"What about her sapphires?"

"They're in my tackle box. In my closet. I took care of everything, Nikki. Now it's just you and me."

Two days after the funeral we all gathered in the library. Spanish moss danced in the warm breeze beyond the tall windows. The sweet scent of tea olives wafted through the open french doors. One and all, except George, had gathered to say farewell to Fidelia. And to say howdy to some easy money.

"This won't take long," Mr. Carlisle, Fidelia's lawyer, said. "Mrs. Pickney-Adder's will is not lengthy."

"To Sam Verbena, my faithful gardener, I leave a lifetime charge account at Brier's Nursery. To Marcel, my hair stylist, I leave a fine letter of reference. To Flora Taylor, my devoted seamstress, I leave..."

For the next few minutes I listened impatiently to Fidelia's leavings. As I did, I wondered how it would be stated. Probably Mr. Carlisle would say if George were found guilty of Fidelia's death, everything would go to next in line: me. And *of course* George would be convicted, mainly because I'd told the police he'd confessed to doing the awful deed and where the incriminating evidence could be found. I hated to turn

on George, but after all, Fidelia was kin.

And I'm a greedy little tart.

"Finally . . ."

My time had come.

"I leave the bulk of my estate to . . ."

Come to Mama. Come to Mama.

"Ricardo Mystic, my wonderful spiritualist."

At first the words didn't sink in. Then they did.

"She couldn't have!"

"I'm afraid she did, Miss O'Shea."

"But Fidelia always said I'd—"

"Two weeks ago Fidelia changed her will. Something about a divine being telling her to give generously to a higher power. You know how Fidelia was."

Across from me Mrs. Mystic turned to her husband. "Such a good boy. You did everything Lavada told you to do."

But as Lavada patted Ricardo's knee, she looked at Number One Assistant and winked.

Numero Uno, on the sly, looked at Mary, standing by the fireplace, and nodded.

Mary, in turn, bowed her head slightly and smiled.

Smugly.

A month after the reading of Fidelia's will, Number Four Assistant found Ricardo slumped over his glow-in-the-dark crystal ball. A few frayed wires, a full jolt of juice, and . . . such a shocking way to go.

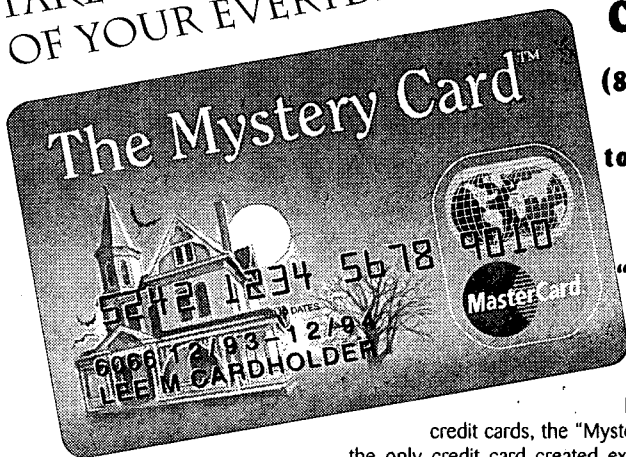
Lavada didn't mourn long. Too busy having a good time on her honeymoon, I guess. Unfortunately, her marital bliss with Numero Uno was short-lived. Five weeks after she said "I do," Lavada sank to the bottom of her heart-shaped swimming pool. Alcohol permeated her system, and about fifty pounds of junk jewelry hung from her neck. Official verdict: accidental death by drowning.

Numero Uno grieved maybe two hours and twenty-seven minutes, after which he and Mary popped off to Las Vegas. Alas, their connubial contentment proved temporary, too.

Mary swears up and down the knife simply got away from her while she and Uno chopped vegetables for Hungarian goulash. Perhaps the police would have believed her, if she hadn't stabbed Uno in the back.

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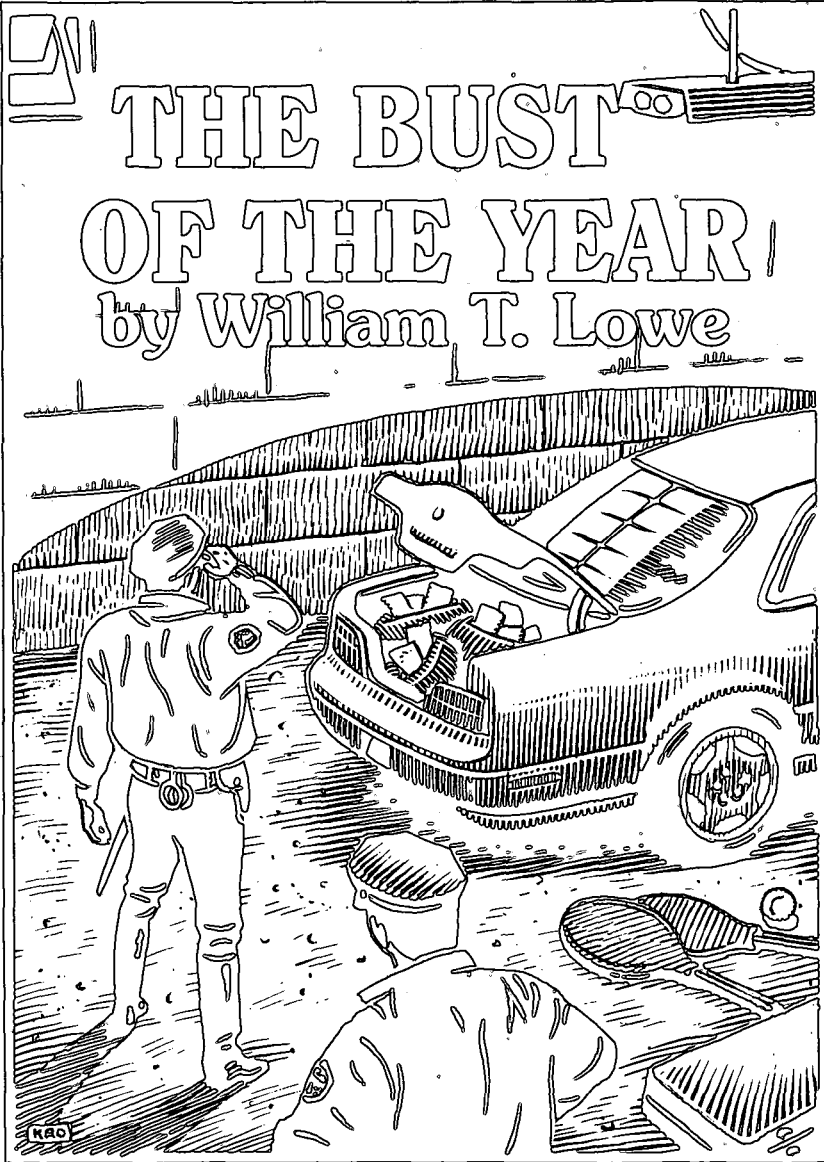


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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At first I didn't believe John T about the cocaine. Not that I thought he was lying, we've been friends too long for that. I thought someone was conning him.

"Did you hear me, Hank? The car was just sitting there in the parking lot with eighty-four pounds of cocaine in the trunk."

John T has too many years in with the Bureau to be easily fooled, and he never sounds excited like this on the phone.

"I heard you, John T," I answered. "You mean the driver just left it and walked away?"

"Right. A DEA agent was tailing him. The guy parked right in front of the Beef Palace restaurant in Ogdensburg and took off. Disappeared!"

"Does the agent know who the driver was?" I asked.

"It was one of Little Augie Vanvetti's men, from the Florida family. Hank, that much coke would be worth over five million on the street . . ."

Even I knew who Augie Vanvetti was. He and his family ran a big cocaine pipeline from Miami and West Palm into Montreal. "Wait a minute, John T," I said. "Why didn't somebody follow the driver?"

"It was this way, Hank. The DEA man was alone. He had been tailing the car all day, and

he figured the driver was going into the restaurant for something to eat. So he went to a phone to call his office. When he got back, the driver was gone."

That's the breaks you get in law enforcement; I know, I was there myself once. "I don't see your problem, John T. Just have somebody sit on the car until the driver or someone else comes back to pick it up."

There was a pause; I heard John T take a deep breath. "The car's gone, Hank. It got towed away." That news item made me take a deep breath, too. So now the car had disappeared?

John T kept talking. "The DEA's got it in a garage on Route 37, Slater's Mobil, two miles south of the Ogdensburg Interchange. Get over there, Hank. That car is a hot lead to Vanvetti; don't let anybody screw it up. This could be the drug bust of the year, old buddy. . . ."

It sounded to me like the operation was already screwed up. "I dunno, John T. Pheasant season opens in three days and I've . . ."

"Just give me one day, Hank. Two days, tops. Check in with Newt Owens; he's a friend of yours."

He was right there, Newt is a friend of mine. "All right," I said. "Two days."

John T is John T. Farley, section chief of the FBI office in Syracuse. I'm Hank Sessions, retired deputy sheriff and sometime fishing and hunting guide. John T and I did a hitch in the military police four wars back. He calls me when something goes off the track up here in what he calls my back yard.

Like now. The DEA had practically stumbled across a car full of cocaine that might belong to Augustus Vanvetti. Little Augie is on a trip north here, and the Drug Enforcement Administration is tailing him, hoping to get a line on his local contacts and maybe catch him with some of the family merchandise.

And since northern New York is his turf, John T has politely extended the services of his office. And now he was about to offer mine as well.

"It looks like Little Augie has made a colossal mistake," John T said happily. "Really big."

His call had caught me in Potsdam, away from my home base in Keeseville. It took me about five minutes to get on the road; Ogdensburg was about an hour to the west on the St. Lawrence Seaway. John T had given me some more background details.

A downstate DEA team had picked up Little Augie and his

men in Lake George. Augie was driving himself in a big new Cadillac. One of his men was driving a late model Lincoln Continental, and a third man was in a Honda. All three cars had out-of-state tags.

A room is waiting for him at the Holiday Inn. Augie goes in, leaving one man outside to watch the cars. One agent stakes out the motel room, leaving the other, a man named Bill Clark, downstairs.

Pretty soon Augie comes out with a man the agent has never seen before. They exchange a few words, and the stranger gets into the Lincoln. Augie gives him a wave as he drives away.

Bill Clark, the DEA street agent, figures the man is just running an errand, but he follows him. He is surprised to see the man head for Interstate 87 and drive north. Clark has no choice, he follows the Lincoln. Meanwhile, Little Augie disappears. He ducks out a back door or something, jumps in his car, and is gone.

That's how it happened that about three thirty this afternoon a big Lincoln with a fortune in the trunk is left untended outside the Beef Palace restaurant, parked in a Handicapped Only space. Obviously somebody is supposed to pick it

up. But who, and why the delay?

"Wherever he is, Little Augie must be sweating bullets," John T said. His car and his cocaine have vanished. Did somebody sell him out? Is somebody trying to take over his business?

Anyway, there's Bill Clark, watching the big Lincoln. He has lost the driver; he isn't about to lose the car. He has checked the doors, they are locked. There's nothing visible inside but an innocent road map on the front seat. He has checked the license with his office; the car has not been reported stolen. He learns that Little Augie has given his teammate the slip.

By late afternoon Clark thinks the car has simply been abandoned. But it is a connection with Little Augie, and he has been told to stick with it, so he does.

About then the manager of the Beef Palace takes a hand. He resents the rudeness and discourtesy of people who take the handicapped parking spaces because they are closer, and some of his customers have complained about the big car by his front door.

So the manager canvasses the tables and checks the men's room; nobody belongs to the big car. The manager phones the

police to complain about an illegally parked car, and he calls a garage to come and take the car away.

Bill Clark watches as a tow truck comes and jockeys the Lincoln out of the parking lot and hauls it to a garage nearby. He follows and identifies himself to the owner, a man named Buck Slater. Clark has him put the Lincoln out of sight behind the garage. A state trooper arrives and confirms that the car is not on a stolen list.

Now Bill Clark has a hunch—there might be something in the car that would indicate Little Augie's present whereabouts, or at least justify all the time he has put in on this job. He decides he has sufficient probable cause to open the car and take a look inside.

"He may have been wrong about that," John T told me, "But nobody was there to argue the point."

Buck Slater, the garage man, helped Clark with the door lock. "Part of my job," he explained. "I get calls all the time, people lock themselves out."

There was nothing of interest under the seats or in the glovebox. The trunk was something else again. It was crammed with camping gear, all brand-new: a small tent, a folding stove, canteens, an axe,

and, at the bottom of the pile, two sleeping bags.

Inside the sleeping bags were twenty-one four-pound bricks of what Clark recognized as high-grade cocaine.

He couldn't believe his eyes. He had never seen more than a pound of cocaine in his life. Its value was measured in ounces, and he was looking at a small mountain of it.

"It's cocaine," he said reverently. He and the trooper stared in awe at the heap of packages. They had hit a drug enforcement jackpot that agents only dream of.

"I've got to call my office," Bill Clark said. "This is too big for me to handle."

"I've got to call my sergeant," said the trooper. "He'll sure as hell want to see this."

"I better call my wife," said Buck Slater, "and tell her not to wait supper."

It gets dark early in October, and it was pitch dark when I arrived at Slater's garage. A sign in the door read: WE DO IT FAST OR WE DO IT RIGHT.

The office was dark, but a number of cars crowded the driveway. A few more people had come to join the party—a BCI man from Malone, another state trooper, and a senior DEA

man, Newt Owens. He and I have worked together before.

Everybody looked at me when I walked in, but Newt waved me over and we shook hands.

"John T said you needed a fourth for bridge," I said.

"We do," Newt said. "Know where we can find one?"

He and I say dumb things like that to each other. I stepped back and looked around. The service bay had rear double doors, and these had been opened to throw a little light on the big Lincoln. The car stood there in the darkness, the trunk open, the camping gear spread out on the floor under a couple of work lights.

The atmosphere in the garage was tense. Everybody had agreed that the car had to be returned to the restaurant—it could be a vital link in a chain. And time was running out; any minute somebody could turn up at the Beef Palace, and not looking for a steak and fries.

I had walked in on the middle of the debate over what to do with the cocaine. It seemed logical to lock it away in the nearest safe place. But Newt Owens had another idea. He and his staff had put in a lot of time on this job, and he wanted to catch somebody, preferably Little Augie Vanvetti, in actual hands-on possession of it.

Newt is a little guy and he was surrounded by taller, meaner-looking officers, but he stood his ground. He did have the seniority; it was his decision and his neck. He wanted to leave the cocaine in the Lincoln.

"All of it?" asked the BCI man. "All eighty-four pounds?"

"Taking a big chance, ain't you?" asked a trooper.

"Just don't leave none of it here," said Buck Slater.

They compromised. Sixty-four pounds of the cocaine were dispatched to be locked up in the state police substation in Malone. About nine thirty the big car was repacked and ready to go back to the Beef Palace parking lot. The problem was how to manage it. Buck's truck could tow the car but not push it.

Buck sidled up to Newt Owens. "I can start the car for you," he whispered, "iffen you tell those troopers to look the other way."

Newt clapped him on the shoulder. "Good man! Do it, and add something to your bill."

So Buck hotwired the Lincoln, and Bill Clark drove it back down the highway and parked it in the exact spot from which it had been taken. Nobody stepped out of the night to

claim the car. Everybody took cover and waited.

Bill Clark went inside to give the night manager a very sketchy story about what was going on. Newt and I wound up in his car in a spot across the highway from which we had a clear view of the Lincoln, the starshine glinting on its chromework.

It was a crisp night, near to a frost. A mile away the lights of the little city threw a glow into the sky. I recalled that I had always wanted to come back to Ogdensburg and visit the Frederick Remington Museum again. But there was no chance that trip.

This was the first opportunity Newt and I had had to talk, but we sat there in silence for a few minutes. Then he stretched and yawned.

"What do you think happened, Hank? Wrong town or wrong day?" he asked me.

"I'll bet on the wrong town," I answered. "Somebody who didn't know upstate New York could easily confuse Ogdensburg and Hogansburg. They're only about fifty miles apart."

Newt nodded. "I'll buy that." He grinned. "I can see somebody sitting in Hogansburg right now, waiting for a big black Lincoln to show up." He looked at me. "You think may-

be Augie's holding hands with the Mohawks?"

I had been thinking about that. Hogansburg is on the Akwesasne reservation. Newt knew some of the Mohawks were friends of mine; his question was not as casual as it sounded.

"Not their style," I told him. Then I asked, "Why do you suppose Augie, or his car, is so far west? Didn't you say he always pushed his coke across the border at Rouses Point?"

"Right. Somebody screwed up, royally."

"Maybe he did plan to send the shipment across here at Ogdensburg or Hogansburg. Then he would have a straight shot down 401 to Toronto."

Newt shook his head. "Nope. His market's in Montreal. Augie's stuff always goes up 87 to the border."

I thought being so predictable would be a damn good reason for Augie to change his pattern, but I didn't say anything.

"How does he get the coke through Customs?" I asked.

"We know he uses ringers," Newt said. "He never makes a run across himself. He picks up some stooge and coaches him. Pays him well, too."

He grinned. "Last time we knew it was Vanvetti stuff he was using a man disguised as a Catholic priest."

"A father? How'd they nail him?"

"The inspector asked him a question about the stations of the cross. The guy didn't know the answer. He had two suitcases full of cocaine."

He yawned again. "On this deal maybe somebody got the wrong day. Maybe they were supposed to switch drivers tomorrow. But I can't figure why the first driver didn't stick around to see the car picked up by the next man. This is a lot of coke to leave in a parking lot."

I shook my head. "I figure the driver wouldn't know what was in the car. Augie would keep that a secret. The driver was just a driver, doing a driver's job."

"Whatever," Newt said. "Somebody screwed up." He closed his eyes and was asleep. I would wake him up in four hours. The restaurant was closed now; there were a few lights on where the night crew was cleaning up. The parking lot was dark, but I could see the black bulk of the Lincoln.

Eighty-four pounds of cocaine. That might not be much in the South Bronx or West Palm, but up here it was a huge amount. I looked at the Lincoln again. How many people were out searching for it? A car with that fortune in the trunk wouldn't be an orphan for long.

Yes, John T, this could be the drug bust of the year.

Two men in a Ford caught my eye even before they turned into the restaurant driveway. One man was excited, pointing at the Lincoln and talking to the driver. It was about nine A.M.; the morning rush had slowed down. The Ford pulled into the driveway, went past the Lincoln, drove around the take-out window, and parked. Both men got out.

One went over to the big car and walked around it. Maybe to see that all four wheels still had their tires, a big city habit. The second man hurried to a pay phone at the far edge of the property, no doubt to call Little Augie. I thought if Augie had given his men portable phones as well as duplicate ignition keys he wouldn't have this mess on his hands.

The first man took out a key, fired up the Lincoln, and backed out carefully. He drove around the restaurant and turned left, heading north. The other man followed in the Ford. Several of us followed him.

It was a short trip. The Lincoln led us to a small motel on Route 11 outside Brushton. Of course, when we saw the big car and the Ford turn in, we had to drive on past and double back.

Clark and the BCI man were somewhere behind us. Newt went into the motel office, and I sneaked around behind a hedge on the other side of an empty swimming pool.

The motel was two long one story buildings facing each other across a wide concrete patio. The Lincoln stood at the far end, near a small group of people. Now I got my first look at the famous Little Augie Vantetti.

He wasn't exactly little, more like a miniature giant. About five feet four, he carried a massive build on rather short legs. He was well dressed in sports clothes and a hat with a feather in it. He had slick black hair and flashy rings on both hands.

Next to Augie were the two men who had driven up in the big car and the Ford. If there had been any cheering over the recovery of the Lincoln, it was over now. And nobody was paying any attention to the trunk.

A man and a woman stood with Augie in front of the car. They were both in their mid-thirties. Even from a distance I could see they were expensively dressed. The woman wore a tailored suit with a corsage pinned on her shoulder. The man wore a three-piece suit with a striped shirt, a maroon tie, and a silk pocket square. Augie was talking to

them very earnestly. They were listening intently.

One of Augie's men came out of the motel room with some suitcases and stowed them in the back seat of the Lincoln. Expensive-looking luggage.

Newt joined me in the shrubbery. "So now we know where Little Augie is," he muttered. "He checked in late yesterday. The couple arrived the day before." He looked at the group by the car. "What's going on?"

"Looks like a rich uncle saying goodbye to a honeymoon couple," I answered.

Newt said, "You've got it. That's how Augie wants to get the stuff across."

We looked at each other. "Sure," I said. "Maybe we should throw rice when they leave."

Newt was frowning. "It might work," he growled. "It just might work."

There had never been any doubt that the cocaine was to be smuggled into Canada; the only question was how to bypass the Customs inspectors. The amateurs hide their stuff in a spare tire or in the bottom of a golf bag. The pros rearrange the upholstery or take out the radio speakers or put a false panel in a van or a truck.

I have heard of fake oxygen bottles in an ambulance, and a double lid on a coffin. Now, looking at the scene in the motel driveway, it was easy to see Augie's plan.

The well-dressed man and woman, the expensive car, the new camping gear, a rich couple bound for a honeymoon in the wilds of Ontario—the last people on earth a Customs agent would suspect of handling contraband. The charade had cost him money, but Augie had a reputation to maintain. And he thought he had five million dollars' worth of cocaine in the trunk, for which he had a buyer waiting somewhere in Montreal.

"There they go," Newt said. I watched as the couple got into the Lincoln. Augie and his men stepped back as the big car turned and headed up the driveway.

Then, to our surprise, Augie took off. His Cadillac was parked by one of the rooms along with the Honda. Without a word Augie stepped over, got in, and drove up the driveway. When he passed us, I got a closer look at him: bull neck, shovel chin, arrogant expression.

Right, I thought. He's lost the Lincoln once, he's not about to let it out of his sight now.

"You drive," Newt said to me as we hurried out of the bushes. When we reached his car, he got busy on the phone.

The question now was where would Augie's honeymooners try to cross the border into Canada. Our little parade was moving east on Route 11 about ten miles below the border. First was the Lincoln with the happy couple, then Augie in his Caddy, then Newt and I in his nondescript Dodge.

The sun was bright and the traffic was light, mostly logging trucks. This was the high plateau at the top of the state, north of the Adirondacks. Mentally I reviewed a map of the area.

The major traffic artery between upstate New York and Canada is I-87 at Champlain, to the east of where we were. There are five smaller and closer crossing stations. A smuggler had his choice: he might think he would get lost in the crowd at the bigger, busier crossing, or that the inspectors at the smaller stations would be less vigilant. Either way he would be wrong.

In twenty minutes we were in Malone. We expected the Lincoln to turn north, and it did. So Augie had changed his pattern; he would try something new.

"Will he take 37 and try to cross at Fort Covington or go 30 to Trout River?" Newt wondered.

"It'll be Trout River," I said. "Trust me. That will put him on a good highway straight to Montreal."

"Yeah, right," Newt growled. "If he gets across."

Where do you live? Where were you born? Where are you going? At the border the northbound traffic inspection is routinely handled by Canadian Customs, southbound by the U.S. inspectors. But at any time U.S. Customs can set up a northbound inspection lane and check the cars going into Canada. That's what they did at Trout River that morning.

Both agencies get a lot of anonymous tips. Maybe from jealous spouses, or business associates who feel cheated, or busybodies with mean streaks. Or, in our case, from another government agency.

Augie got to the border station at Trout River just in time to see the big Lincoln ahead of him pulled out of the inspection lane into a separate area nearby. All traffic was halted temporarily, and he watched as the agents had the suitcases taken out and opened and the trunk unloaded.

A sniffer dog, a black Lab named Sherlock, was brought out. He went right to the sleeping bags, sniffed them both with great interest, and then sat down beside them. His handler rewarded him with one of his favorite toys.

The honeymoon couple stood by silently. Nobody had listened to them when they claimed they had just borrowed the car from a friend. Augie watched as they were arrested and led away and his car impounded. We were too far away to see the expression on his face.

Then Augie made what everybody thought was another mistake. He could have turned around and gone back to Florida. He could have told himself there was more cocaine where that came from. But when the inspector waved him through, Augie drove on into Canada, and as we learned later, he stayed there.

"He's gone," I said to Newt Owens. "Good riddance."

"Damn. That would have been a big arrest."

"Don't be a sore loser. Let's go pick up my car."

So Customs got twenty pounds of cocaine, a low-mileage Lincoln, and a bunch of new camping gear. As far as I was concerned, the job was over. All I had to do now was

check out with John T and go home. I wanted to be on hand for pheasant season.

One of the troopers from the Malone substation had driven my car up, and it was waiting for me in Constable, a few miles south on Route 30. Before I headed home, I had a word with Bill Clark. I remembered that he was the only one who had actually seen the first driver of the Lincoln, the man Augie had entrusted the car to down in Lake George.

"What did this guy look like, Bill?"

"Big man," Clark said. "Fat. A smoker."

Now I knew Bill didn't work for me and he hadn't been home in a couple of days, but I asked him to do something else. I asked him to go back to Ogdensburg and check the hospital and the doctors' offices.

"Humor me, Bill," I said. "It's just a hunch."

When I got home, my phone was ringing. It was Clark. "Bingo," he said. "The big guy is in the hospital. Heart attack. Name of Edward Fulco, address in Newark. You want me to keep him covered?"

"Better ask Newt," I told him. "Thanks, Bill."

That would explain why Augie's driver had gone to the wrong town. He was sick, got

confused, and wound up with a heart attack. Just before he blacked out, he shoved the Lincoln into that parking spot at the restaurant. Bill Clark said he collapsed right at the feet of a pair of off-duty firemen. Thanks to their training, they saw what was wrong, loaded the unconscious man into a van, and hustled him off to the hospital.

And that answered another question. Maybe there never was a second driver. Maybe this guy was supposed to drive straight to that motel outside Brushton to meet Augie and his honeymoon actors. Maybe somebody could ask him someday; right now I didn't care. I was tired, I had lost most of a night's sleep, and I had to call John T.

"Sure," I said, "Newt could have arrested Little Augie at that motel, but on what charge? Look at it this way, John T. Here's Augie standing in a public driveway by a car that Newt can't connect with him, and having an innocent conversation with some people about baseball or something.

"Newt was hoping Augie would at least get in the car, but he didn't. He didn't even put a fingerprint on it. And the object of the game was to bust Augie while he was holding.—to establish criminal posses-

sion of a controlled substance, and so on.

"Anyway, you know what happened. Customs nailed the car and the coke, and Augie beat it into Canada. Be happy, John T. You've got the cocaine, it's not out on the street, and Augie's name will be mud down in Florida."

I thought that would be the last I heard of Little Augie Vanvetti. I was wrong.

Ten days later John T called me again. "How's everything up there in the boonies?" he asked.

I don't like that "boonies" talk. Yes, we are in the mountains with trees and fields and rivers. But we are not backward. Downstate they have dope dealers in the schoolyards, and the streets aren't safe at night. Up here we have clean air and a utility that burns old auto tires to make electricity. So who's ahead of whom?

"Fine," I answered him. "How's everything in smog city?" I waited. I knew he wanted something. He began by bringing me up to date on the Vanvetti family.

The newspapers had reported the seizure by Customs of twenty pounds of high-grade cocaine, and the DEA made sure the news got down to West Palm. The Vanvetti family was

understandably upset. Little Augie had been entrusted with eighty-four pounds of cocaine, and now only twenty pounds rested in a government vault.

Thus Augie had allowed sixty-four pounds of valuable merchandise to disappear. Then he himself had vanished into Canada without announcing any plans for a vacation. The family felt this was the act of a heinous and disloyal doublecrosser. The Vanvettis wished to settle accounts.

"Here's the deal, Hank. Little Augie is hiding up in Montreal, and he wants to come home."

"Well, maybe his mother will be glad to see him."

"No, he doesn't want to go down to West Palm. He knows there's a contract out on him down there. He wants to come here. If we give him protection, he'll tell us some family secrets."

"Way to go, John T," I said. "Thanks for calling."

"Wait a minute, Hank! We want you to escort Augie back across the border. Just bring him to Plattsburgh. It's your back yard, you can do it easy ..."

For these little odd jobs John T carries me on his time sheet as a consultant. The extra money does come in handy. I

stalled for awhile, but I agreed to do it.

Two nights later I was standing under a tree somewhere very near the border. I could have thrown a rock into Canada if I had known which direction to throw it. It was very dark and very cold, and it was beginning to snow.

Once again I was a part of one of John T's little schemes. Little Augie was afraid to show himself in public. He knew or suspected the family was having him watched. John T and the various agencies involved had arranged that Augie would cross the border secretly on foot.

On foot. People do it almost every day. Or night. At the border down in Texas are miles of chain link fence. Up here there's no fence, just miles of woods. Heavy, thick woods with trails and paths that run north and south.

Most of the illegal aliens from Europe and the Near East try to enter the United States this way. A contact in Canada puts them in touch with a guide who brings them down close to the border, at night of course. The guide tells them to "follow this path a hundred yards and you'll come to an open place and a blue sedan. The driver will take you to Glens Falls or Albany or wherever."

The helpful guide collects his fee and departs, forgetting to mention the motion detectors and the heat-sensitive devices the U.S. Border Patrol maintains in these woods. Several hundred illegals try to walk across every month. Several hundred get caught.

More snowflakes touched my face. It was late October but not too early for the first snow of the season. When I had left home to drive up to Champlain, the barometer was falling and the sky was full of leaden clouds. Snow clouds.

At the office complex outside Rouses Point I checked in at the Border Patrol office and met the rest of the reception committee. Newt Owens was on assignment somewhere, and Bill Clark had gone back to his home office. There was a DEA agent, a state trooper, and a Border Patrol officer who was our host. We drank coffee until it was time to load into a couple of Patrol vehicles and drive to this spot.

"Augie will be wearing a red and black hunting jacket and a fur hat," John T had promised me. "You can't miss him." An agent in Canada was to start Augie on the path that would lead him to where we waited. And of course the Border Patrol had agreed not to demonstrate

their electronic surveillance devices to our guest.

Someone to my right snapped on a flashlight, probably to check the time, and turned it off again but not before I saw more snowflakes. Someone else shifted his feet in some dry leaves. My legs were beginning to ache from the cold. I wondered if Augie's family gossip would be worth all this bother. I wondered if I had enough firewood for the winter. I wondered . . .

There was a flicker of light somewhere ahead. The Border Patrol officer walked forward in the darkness. "He's coming," someone muttered and snapped on a lantern. I strained my eyes to see, and then I could make out a form coming through the trees. As he came into the light, we saw a short, heavysset man wearing a bushy fur hat and a red and black jacket. He held out his hand.

"Hi, fellows. I'm Augie Vanvetti."

I stood rooted to the ground as the others moved forward. Then I turned and ran back the way we had come as fast as I could. I wanted a telephone and right away.

The man with the chunky build in the red and black jacket was not Little Augie. He was another ringer.

*

The Canadian police found Little Augie sitting on a bar stool at Montreal's Mirabel Airport. He had a first class ticket to Paris in his pocket, and would have been halfway there if the snow squall hadn't socked in the airport and canceled all flights.

Since I was the closest person who knew Augie by sight, I was driven up to police headquarters in Montreal to make a positive identification.

The Canadian authorities decided to hold Augie for awhile; they had questions of their own about his narcotics distribution network.

Augie was very bitter about the whole thing. Setting up the stand-in was supposed to buy him enough time to get out of

the country. But his lookalike was spotted right away, and by a retired hick cop. And then the weather; nobody had predicted that it would snow.

The DEA charged Augie's ringer with obstructing justice—they couldn't charge him with impersonating a criminal—but they finally let him go.

So I lost another night's sleep. I was bushed when I got home, but I still had chores to do.

And John T called. "So it wasn't the bust of the year," he said, "but don't worry about it. We'll have plenty of other chances, old buddy."

"Sure we will," I said, "but next time, don't call us, we'll call you."

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Betty Ickes	niece	pistol	bus
Charles Madison	butler	dagger	
Delores Jarvis	maid	blackjack	
Edgar Hardin	cook	blowgun	
Flora Keene	sister	none	train



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FICTION

Manhattan Chops

by James McKimmey

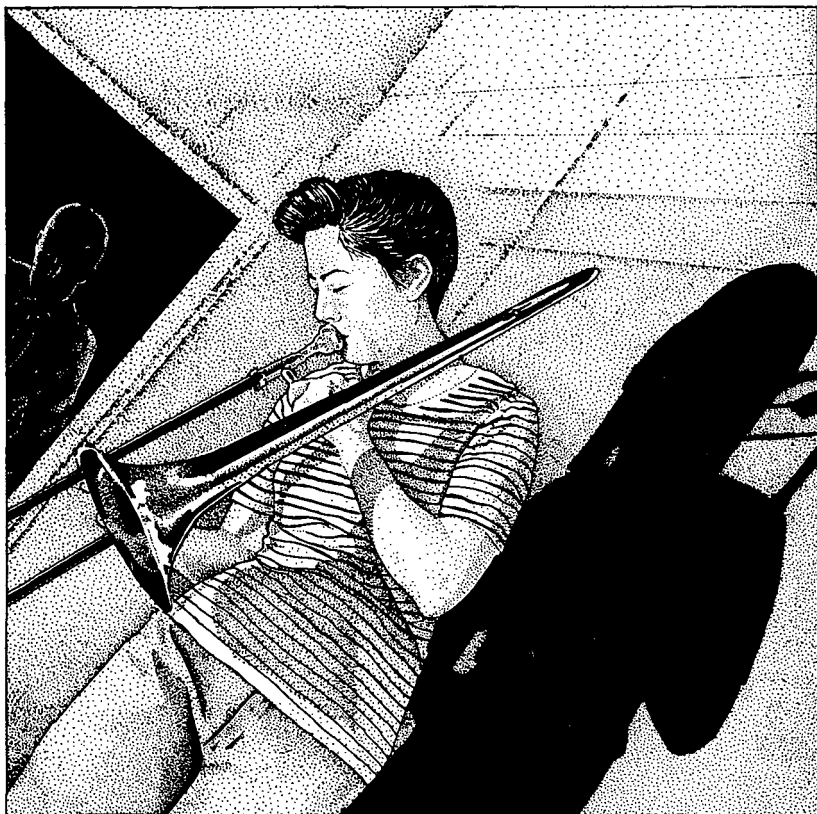


Illustration by Steve Cavallo

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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Caswell Farnsworth, a jazz disciple, found out about Sam Lomax on a Monday morning at one of his favorite haunts, the tiny secondhand record shop on Lake Tahoe Boulevard.

Said a hefty gray-bearded owner named Gabriel: "Came into town in an old junker van from where I know not. Saw my sign and stopped. Looked over the goods. Then asked if there was a place to sit in as a jazz trombonist in this armpit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. You ever hear anybody call Tahoe the armpit of the Sierra?"

"Can't recall it, no." A spare fifty-one-year-old man with a coppery tanned face, white hair, and black-rimmed glasses, Farnsworth owned a smooth, cultivated baritone that had served him well as an executive in the San Francisco home office of the Genesis West Insurance Company for which he'd worked from the age of twenty to fifty, at which time he'd happily retired. Dressed far more casually than he ever had during his professional career, but still expensively, he wore a tan cashmere jacket, a tailored, open-throated white shirt, dusky brown pants, and English loafers as he walked slowly past shelves of cassettes searching for something of special quality that he didn't own.

Although Gabriel sold country, pop, rock, rap, and classical as well, the man also stocked any and every bit of jazz that he could find at garage sales, flea markets, and the Salvation Army, from reissues of Jelly Roll Morton to recent releases by Joe Henderson. Farnsworth was interested in the entire span, owning no prejudices about style.

"Well, that will give you some idea of Sam Lomax," said Gabriel. "She told me directly, and in all humility, that she was the greatest jazz musician who ever lived."

"A she."

"Her father wanted a boy. Mean little thing, Caswell. Kept looking over her shoulder like she was scared to death of whoever might come in next. How much can an itinerant jazz musician earn these days of rock? Bill collectors may be one step behind her. I told her the only way she could prove around here that she was the greatest jazz musician who ever lived was to sit in with the ancient trio that rehearses down the highway at the Senior Center. I don't know any other group blowing jazz around town, do you?"

"There was a guy had a bunch playing late hours in a restaurant last winter. Molly and I heard them once and they

were good—somewhere in between what that fellow with the *Tonight Show*, Branford Marsalis, does with his recordings and, let's see, maybe Red Norvo's group way back. But I heard the guy opened a hot dog stand at the beach when summer arrived."

"Says a lot about the state of jazz."

"Unfortunately. But back to Sam Lomax. How old is she?"

"Twenty-seven, twenty-eight."

"Has she played with anyone you and I might know?"

"Claims they won't give her a chance on account of her being a woman. I don't think that's all of it, Caswell. She's a natural irritant. Not her looks, actually. She's kind of pretty, tiny as she is and even with her hair cut like that. It's just her personality. And the voice—you can't get around that."

"Well, no matter. If she is the greatest jazz musician who ever lived, I'd better check her out. Do you know when the senior group rehearses? I've never caught them."

Gabriel looked at his watch. "Ten A.M.—right now." He delivered a crooked-toothed grin. "Who are you today, Caswell? Mike Hammer?"

Farnsworth shrugged. "Not up to it today. All those women." He'd gotten to know Ga-

briel well enough to have explained that after thirty years of dedication to the insurance company, with the main day's-end relaxation consisting of reading mystery novels while he listened to jazz recordings, he now, in the freedom of his retirement, often imagined himself to be some fictional detective. "Maybe Lew Archer."

"John D. MacDonald's boy."

"Ross Macdonald's. John D.'s was Travis McGee."

"That's right. It was John D. who put you in that boat you and Molly live in now. McGee had *The Busted Flush* powerboat; you got *The Pooped Out* houseboat."

"True. Gabriel, don't take it too seriously, my identifying with those detectives."

Gabriel grinned. "Now why in the world would I ever do that, Caswell?"

The Senior Center was located in a sprawling, one story frame structure. When Farnsworth got out of his compact Subaru, he saw a beat-up blue Volkswagen van also in the parking lot; its windows had dark closed curtains. As he walked through cool, dry autumn air toward the front doorway, from an open window he could hear "In the Mood" being given a lusty treatment by a

small instrumental aggregation.

Stepping into the large dining room where the group was playing, Farnsworth remembered that he'd first heard "In the Mood" as a precocious five-year-old listening in bed to a small radio in his parents' house in San Francisco's Sunset district. By that time Glenn Miller had been lost in a World War II plane, and Tex Beneke, Miller's tenor saxophonist who doubled as a vocalist, had taken over leadership of the band.

Despite the number's popularity, Farnsworth had hated it. But that judgment was suddenly changed by what he was hearing from a slide trombone.

Holding its mouthpiece to her lips was none other than Sam Lomax—it had to be. She was indeed tiny, pretty even with cheeks distended, wearing a faded blue sweatshirt and equally faded blue denim jeans above her scuffed tennis shoes. Her pale brown hair was cut short in crew fashion.

Behind the young woman were three aged gentlemen, one playing a tenor saxophone, another a trumpet, and the third a set of drums. They were using their instruments well, Farnsworth realized, intent upon properly backing what

the woman was doing with her horn.

What she was doing was spectacular. Farnsworth pulled out a metal folding chair from a dining table and sat down to listen.

Sam Lomax was employing the traditional style of the big-band era. She owned, he decided, the odd shades and tones of Juan Tizol, who'd starred as Duke Ellington's valve trombonist with his wild fast-throat vibrato. Then that would disappear to be replaced by the inventiveness of a Bill Harris, who'd used such things as two-octave slithers and long-held dissonant notes to season the screaming sound of Woody Herman's "First Herd."

Yet, Farnsworth had to admit, the young woman was no simple copier of forties swing or jazz after all. Her versatility was so great that she merely hinted at the work of others as she plunged along on her own highly original improvising path.

The number finished with explosive volume, trombone dominating, and Farnsworth stood to applaud heartily.

The older members of the group were beaming. But Sam Lomax whirled around to shake her trombone angrily in the direction of the drummer, yelling loudly in a harsh,

hoarse voice, "What the hell kind of a timekeeper are you? A *two-year-old* could count better!"

"Now just a minute," said the trumpet player, his deeply lined face losing its pleased expression. "Lou actually played with Glenn Miller."

"For a week?" the young woman snarled, pale blue eyes flashing angrily. "A day? Five minutes? He should give up and die!"

Silence suddenly overwhelmed the room. Sam Lomax replaced her trombone in its case as Farnsworth stared at her with fascination. She yanked the case by its handle and strode toward the door. As she passed Farnsworth, he said, "I'd say you're better than Jack Teagarden. Not that you play like he did. But you're better."

She stopped immediately. "Better than Teagarden, huh? Rum-bum that he was. What other alcoholics come to mind?"

"I don't know if they were alcoholics. But I also thought of Juan Tizol and Bill Harris. Near the end you were even demonstrating some of that kind of brilliance I associate with J. C. Higgenbotham. I don't mean to imply you copy any of them. You're your own man. Sorry. Woman."

She was examining him more closely. "At least you didn't mention Tommy Dorsey. What's your name, grandpa?"

"Caswell Farnsworth. Dorsey was a fine trombonist, but he didn't play jazz."

"You've got that right anyway. What's *your* claim to fame, Farnsworth?"

"I don't make one," he said. "I just happen to love jazz. I've spent a lifetime listening to it and getting to know it about as well as any fan can. And I've come to an absolute conclusion, young lady. You've got to be the best jazz trombonist around."

"Tell me something I don't already know. Why am I talking to you anyway?" she added, looking over her shoulder at windows, doors. "I don't have to, do I?"

Farnsworth felt his own anger. "No, you don't."

"I'm the greatest jazz musician who ever *lived*, Farnsworth. Not just around, but *anywhere*! And I don't, repeat *don't*, need anybody else to tell me so. Don't bother me again—*ever*! Puleeze!"

The *Pooped Out*, its name lettered in red on its blue and white bow, was berthed in a south shore marina. It was a gleaming, refurbished houseboat

with four somewhat small but handsome rooms. The view out any window was sensational. It was entirely all that Farnsworth and his wife needed or wanted as a home these days.

Now, on this evening, Molly was in San Francisco visiting old friends for a few days. Having become the chief cook in his second life—Molly wanted out of the kitchen after all the years she'd spent inside one preparing dinners for his business associates—Farnsworth skillfully sauteed a cut of sole in a coated, greaseless skillet and made a substantial salad out of lettuce, tomato, and avocado, sparingly dressed with olive oil and vinegar. He cooked a steady regimen of low-fat meals with the sunny expectation that it would keep both of them healthy in their semi-elderly condition.

He'd eaten and then retired to the study to play the Charlie Parker album he'd discovered in Gabriel's shop and to begin a new Robert Parker mystery novel, automatically becoming Spenser operating as a P.I. in Boston, where Farnsworth had never been.

Someone began trying to pound the front door down with what was apparently a sledgehammer.

Farnsworth hurried to get it open, and discovered Sam Lo-

max. Apparently she'd used nothing more than her little fists.

"Was that you making all that bloody racket?" he asked politely.

"Good God, Farnsworth," she said, picking up a brown plastic sack from the deck. "Let me in before they make a move."

Farnsworth stepped back. "Who would be wanting to make a move, I wonder?"

She shook her plastic bag in front of his face. "The people who want this."

"Naturally," he said. "How did you find me, by the way?"

"That idiot Gabriel. Who else is in here, your wife?"

"She's gone for a few days."

"Don't lie, Farnsworth."

"I'm not."

"Then where's your stereo system?"

Perplexed, he led her to the study. She examined the tape deck, CD player, receivers, and speakers.

"Where'd you get the money to buy on this level, Farnsworth?"

"The Genesis West Insurance Company."

"Who died?"

"I worked for that company for thirty years. That's where I made my money. Which I carefully invested."

"All so you could afford to be a jazz fan. Yeah, well, while

you've been raking it in and enjoying all that jazz, do you know how many of those people you've been listening to have been between jobs and wondering where their next penny was coming from?"

"No, ma'am," Farnsworth replied honestly.

"I didn't think so. All right. Let's talk about some musicians who made it big, Farnsworth." She dug a hand into her plastic bag and pulled out a cassette. "'Manhattan Chops,' Farnsworth," she said dramatically, "played by Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. How do you like that?"

"Benny on one side? Artie on the other?"

"Both on one side. Both on the other side. Playing together."

Farnsworth shook his head. "I don't believe that. The most prominent clarinet players of their time *never* recorded together. That would have been a hell of a big piece of news, and I would have been one of the first to have heard about it."

"Well, you're hearing about it now," she said in that hoarse, penetrating voice. She fitted the tape into the cassette compartment. "Shut your damned mouth and sit down and listen, old man!"

He did, in astonishment.

*

When he'd heard the entire tape, which had obviously been professionally recorded, he sat shaking his head in disbelief.

"What do you say now, Farnsworth?"

"It's Goodman, all right." It was, he was certain. The flawless command of his instrument. Split-second improvisations that matched melodic sounds composers took months to create. The deliberately rough jazz tone, right down to the growls. Everything.

"Shaw, too?" she asked.

He nodded in confusion. "Has to be." And it did, he realized. Also the technical command but a less rough tone. The greater capriciousness of invention. The slides, ah yes, the familiar slides. Who wouldn't know that it was really Artie Shaw, especially Caswell Farnsworth?

"Who on piano?" She was a teacher now, questioning a student.

"Well, for God's sake, who else but Count Basie? All that tasteful right-hand stuff, using one absolutely correct note to get a better effect than somebody else using twenty? Now and then that stride style he learned from Fats Waller?"

"Drums?"

"Do you think I wouldn't know Gene Krupa? With all

the noisy banging of the bass drum?"

"There you go, Farnsworth," she said victoriously. "Goodman, Shaw, Basie, and Krupa. All four together for the first time. And the last."

"Krupa was Goodman's drummer for a good while. Basie played with Goodman at least once, on an all-star gig, I think I remember."

"But Shaw?"

"Can't be. He's the only one still alive. Krupa died in 1973, Basie in '84, Goodman in '86. Shaw's the survivor. He lives in California somewhere, I know that much. Maybe I can get his telephone number from somebody in the business. I'll ask him about this."

"Go ahead. I already did. He won't admit it no matter how you push him. It's my personal opinion that he doesn't want the comparison with Benny, not even now."

"Maybe I know the real reason why he won't. Because it didn't happen the way it sounds. And I think I know how it was done."

"Well, aren't you smart, amateur that you are. They showed up for the gig and blew. That's how."

"When? Where?"

"When they were all alive and before Shaw gave up the

clarinet. Where, I wouldn't know."

"What's the label?"

"There isn't any."

He was shaking his head again. "They didn't do it together. Separately. An engineer in a studio put their sounds together. That's what you've got there, Lomax. It's a hoax."

"Like hell it is! They're all working off each other, back and forth, riff after riff, improvising the same melody—'Manhattan Chops.'"

Chops, Farnsworth reflected. A musical term, like someone has a lot of chops, meaning a lot of talent. A heavyweight musician, in other words. And if the borough of Manhattan hasn't had the best chops in the universe when it comes to producing great music, where do you look?

"'Manhattan Chops' is a nice, bright, funky tune, Lomax. Really compelling, as a matter of fact. But I've never heard it before. Do you know who wrote it?"

"Doesn't matter. What these guys did with it is all that matters. And what they did, Farnsworth, was brilliant. How can you argue with that?"

"I'm not," Farnsworth said truthfully. "Where did you get that cassette?"

"If I'd brought Jesus Christ in here and introduced him to you, you'd have asked where I found him, wouldn't you?"

"Well—"

"Do you have any idea at all what this cassette's worth, Farnsworth?"

"It would depend upon who's buying, I suspect. Definitely a relative situation."

"Work that tape through state-of-the-art equipment in a really bigtime studio, distribute it properly with the right kind of promotion, and it's worth a fortune."

Farnsworth shrugged. "But who's going to do that?"

"How about somebody following right behind me, day in, day out, just looking for the chance to steal it?"

He was remembering her continual furtive manner. "Do you really believe somebody's following you for that cassette?"

"I *know* it. And I'm sick, sick, sick of it, Farnsworth. I got the tape. Now I want rid of it. I'll sacrifice. Make an offer."

At last he understood why she'd come. "What makes you think I can afford to make an offer?"

"All that money from the insurance company, carefully invested. I've got an eye for those expensive clothes you wear, Farnsworth. I see how your hair's styled. I'm inside this

boat looking at what you've got in here. Retired at fifty, the clown at the record store said. You can afford it, all right."

Her eyes were angry. She obviously resented him.

"How much are you asking?"

"You want it so bad you can taste it, don't you?"

"How much?"

"I'm giving it away for fifty thousand dollars."

He laughed.

"Twenty," she said.

He shook his head, sobering now, realizing her vulnerability. If that were really Benny and Artie together... "Lo-max," he said, "I can't."

"Ten."

"If I were getting the interest they used to pay on CD accounts, even a reasonable percentage, I might make you a counteroffer. But with things the way they are—"

"I'm busted, Farnsworth. I've got to get out of town. And I'd rather see you have it on account of you could appreciate it. For the rest of your life. I don't want to break down and get on my knees, for Christ' sake!" Her voice was trembling, and her blue eyes appeared blurred.

Farnsworth stood and walked to a bookcase. It was, perhaps, foolish, but he always kept extra currency there, in his collected Dashiell Hammett. It was for emergency use

in case his bank was closed—he wouldn't go near ATM machines at Tahoe where too many people, desperate to replace money lost at gambling tables, might be waiting.

"Five big ones, Lomax. Best I can do."

"Five bills," she whispered. She held out a hand and took them.

"Would you like a cold pale ale now that we've completed business?" he asked her. "Sierra Nevada, the best in my opinion."

"Why ask a musician something like that, Farnsworth?" She seemed in control again.

He got two bottles from a small refrigerator in the room. "Glasses?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

He handed her an ale and carried his to his chair. She leaned back against the desk and tipped the bottle to her mouth.

"Tell me how you got to be such a hell of a trombonist," he said. "Start early? Musical parents?"

"My parents died young. So I grew up with families, plural, Farnsworth. Foster families who took in kids solely for the cash they got for doing it. Some uncle died and left his trombone behind. I picked it up when I was ten. I was working with small groups inside a year

and had a union card when I turned twelve. Then I split from the foster crap. I've been on my own ever since."

"Remarkable," he said. "Truly."

"So are you, Farnsworth," she said in her powerful, nerve-grating voice. She drained her bottle and suddenly slammed it into a wastebasket. "Five big ones! You call a bill a big one! What century are you in anyway, old man? You get a god-damned million dollar treasure and pay me peanuts for it, creepy old dingus that you are. I hope the tape in that cassette turns brittle and breaks in a thousand places before you get it copied. Why don't you catch cancer and die in great pain, Farnsworth."

She was gone.

The next thing he did was to make five dubs of the tape, insurance protection. The next was to phone Molly in San Francisco.

A large woman with hair as white as his, she had a husky, low-pitched voice that had attracted him from the first moment he'd heard it in the small North Beach jazz club where they'd met.

"Goodman and Shaw recorded together?" she said. "It's a scam, Caswell. I'd call Bunco and report her."

"You've been watching too many *Dragnet* reruns," he said somewhat archly. "I tell you it's Benny and Artie playing this really bright, catchy, funky little melody. 'Manhattan Chops' it's called. Trading improvisations. Together!"

"Did you open the Chivas Regal the insurance company sent you last Christmas, Caswell? The only time you drink too much is when it's free eighteen-dollar-a-bottle scotch from the insurance company."

"I've had one bottle of ale."

"Then if that's true," she said, "I'd drink no more than half a bottle at a time from now on. Think of all the money you'll save. Five hundred dollars, Caswell—it makes my heart ache."

"Your failure to believe what I'm telling you is what's making mine ache."

"Well," she said, "if the poor thing really needed the money, who cares? We'll just cut down on something crucial in the coming weeks."

"That tape I got from her is worth a fortune, Molly. I'm telling you."

"Please try to get a good sleep tonight, dear. And don't, for heaven's sake, whatever you do, let giving her that five hundred bother your conscience so much that you can't. And no more Chivas Regal to-

night. Just keep remembering, Caswell, that I'll be with you tomorrow afternoon. Everything will be back to all right then."

The first order of business early Tuesday morning, Farnsworth decided, was to determine which detective he was going to be. After all, he had to solve the mystery of the recording Sam Lomax had called "Manhattan Chops."

Well, he thought, he'd chatted with Gabriel about John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, who had indeed influenced his purchase of this houseboat. The situation was absolutely right, he decided, for being McGee.

He shaved and showered, then dressed in tailored gray gabardine slacks, white Reeboks, and, to show off his tan, a lightweight yellow sweater. In the galley he scrambled a carton of Egg Beaters and downed them wolfishly, a suitable breakfast considering the shapely young woman he pretended to have left in the bedroom where she now slept in blissful, grateful exhaustion. He went out on the deck imagining himself to be six four and over two hundred pounds, pulled in his stomach, puffed out his chest, and did some isometrics against the railing.

Then he returned to the study. He replayed both sides of "Manhattan Chops," listening as carefully as he'd ever listened to any music in his life. When it was over, he said to an imaginary Meyer (McGee's sidekick), "Goodman, Shaw, Basie, Krupa."

"Has to be," Meyer replied, as obliging as always.

"Benny swinging," said Farnsworth. "Artie swinging with him. The Count swinging right behind both of them."

"Makes you want to get up and dance, doesn't it?"

"And vintage Krupa."

"A shade crude, of course, as usual. Loses some of the swinging here and there because of his desperate desire to show off. Too many cowbells, too many rim shots, too much bass drum, too much tom-tomming, all too loud. Vintage Krupa."

Farnsworth dialed the San Francisco phone number of Eddie Tolbert, who'd started and still ran the now-famous Frisco Jamming Jazz Festival held every late summer in Golden Gate Park. Tolbert, a popular Bay Area disk jockey at the time he'd initiated the festival, had deliberately used the word Frisco when columnist Herb Caen had been young enough to become enraged over it, thereby giving the event enormous free publicity.

"Eddie Tolbert here," came the response. In the way he'd met so many people, Farnsworth had been introduced to the man at a downtown Rotarian meeting. He'd later spent the cocktail time at meeting after meeting listening to Tolbert describe the jazz musicians that Farnsworth had come to respect so much.

"Caswell Farnsworth on this end."

"Caswell, you devil! What's happening up there on that mountain?"

Farnsworth told him about Sam Lomax and her recording.

"Clever engineering," said Tolbert. "Nothing more or less. Shaw never recorded with Goodman, take my word."

"Normally I would. But I want you to listen to it. I'll send a copy to you today by overnight Federal Express. Then check your reaction."

"I'm not going to change my mind, Caswell. That broad would do anything for a buck. God knows she can't hold a job, no matter how good she is."

"You know her?" Farnsworth asked in surprise.

"Showed up just before one of my festivals about, let's see, three years ago. I was putting together a small group for the Saturday night gig. I had Johnny Griffin on tenor saxophone," he explained as though

Farnsworth wouldn't know Griffin's instrument. "Clark Terry on trumpet, Frank Wess on flute, and Elvin Jones on drums. She said she was better than any of them. Damned if she wasn't as good as she said."

"So she played with those people?" Farnsworth asked.

"Rehearsed with them late Saturday morning, a run-through for the evening show, using this melody she'd written herself as a base. She helped make it a *gorgeous* combination of talent. But then she suddenly started reading them off, one by one, for screwing up. She had them so pissed off, in twenty minutes, they walked off the stand. I had to fire her in order to get them back. Can you believe it?"

"Actually I can, yes," said Farnsworth.

She was in Gabriel's tiny record shop when Farnsworth arrived.

"Well," she said in a sardonic tone as Gabriel put change into her small palm beside his register, "if it isn't the great Caswell Farnsworth himself. Hello, cheapo."

"Good morning, Lomax," Farnsworth said calmly.

Gabriel bagged several record cassettes and handed them to her, saying, "Thank you very much."

She nodded. "You're welcome, clown. What's the matter, Farnsworth, you get tired of that tape you screwed me out of, so you're looking for something else in this trash basket?"

"Actually, no. My wife won't arrive home until this afternoon. I got lonely. So I decided to drive over and chat with Gabriel. Now I can chat with you, too."

"No, you can't," she sneered. "I'm leaving this armpit, but quickly. I never want to see it again. I never want to see the two of you again either. I hope you trip over one another and break all your stinking bones."

"Good luck to you, too, Lomax," Farnsworth called to her.

They watched through a window as she drove away in her beat-up van.

Then Farnsworth said, "What'd she buy, Gabriel?"

"Beethoven, Stravinsky, Ravel, Shostakovich," said Gabriel.

"Classical," Farnsworth commented softly. "Yeah, well, I guess that figures."

He picked up Molly at the airport shortly after five o'clock that afternoon. They'd just sat down for cocktails when Farnsworth unrolled the local newspaper that had been delivered to the deck of the houseboat. He

stared at a front-page story with shock.

"Your face has a ghastly expression," Molly said to him. "Who died?"

"Sam Lomax," he said. "They found her in her van about ten miles out of town off Highway 50, an apparent homicide."

Detective Sergeant Vincent Hyde was in charge of detectives at the sheriff's substation on the Nevada side of the state line. Farnsworth had deliberately gone about meeting the diminutive, graying, pleasant-tempered man. As someone who engaged in fanciful detective work, Farnsworth thought it fitting to get to know someone officially in the game. Hyde was an encyclopedia of investigative knowledge and only too eager to talk it all into Farnsworth's willing ears. They'd spent hours together in Hyde's office.

Farnsworth lifted the telephone on the coffee table and called the detective, saying:

"Caswell, sergeant. I just read in the *Trib* that Sam Lomax was murdered."

"You knew her, Caswell?"

"Slightly and recently. But I have some knowledge that may prove to be of value to you. About why someone might have wanted to kill her."

"Wonderful, Caswell. But my

team's just gathering everything together right now. Why don't you come in tomorrow morning? She'd deader'n a doornail, and the coroner's got her body down in Reno. There's no hurry about anything. Make it about ten."

Farnsworth was showered, shaved, and dressed by nine thirty the next morning, still the knight-errant Travis McGee, cool and confident and a trifle macho, ready to go see the local law. He was on his way to the door when the telephone on the coffee table sounded. He lifted it to find Eddie Tolbert on the other end, saying:

"I just listened to the cassette you sent, Caswell. I don't believe it but I have to. When? How? Where in God's name did Lomax get this thing?"

"You're convinced?"

"I have to be. My ears can't, by God, be fooled. Goodman, Shaw, Basie, and Krupa, working off that funky melody she said she wrote!"

"Which?" Farnsworth asked carefully.

"The one she introduced to Griffin, Terry, Wess, and Jones when she was trying to get on at my festival."

"That one," Farnsworth said quietly. "Do you happen to remember if she had a name for it?"

"'Manhattan Chops.' She said she wrote it in a small, dirty hotel room on West 42nd."

"Yes," he said softly. He took a breath. "But she's dead now, Eddie. Murdered. I don't know why or who did it. All I know right now is that she won't ever again play her trombone that unbelievable way she could."

"Trombone?" Tolbert asked with surprise in his voice. "She played an acoustic bass!"

Sergeant Vincent Hyde's office was small and cluttered. He sat at his desk wearing dark suit pants, a white shirt, a red tie, and a holstered 9mm Sig Sauer pistol.

Farnsworth seated himself. "You've already got the killer?"

"Confessed a half hour ago. Eric Nickerson, age fifty-seven, in and out of prisons all his life because of a truly nasty temper he can't control."

"Maybe," Farnsworth said, "he didn't really do it and confessed to get back in custody—you've told me about people like that."

"I don't doubt he wants back in prison, which is why he came in on his own and confessed. But he killed her, all right. I never tell the media how somebody was murdered, you know that. But *he* told me how Lomax was—with the tire iron we found in the van. It's got his

fingerprints and her blood type on it."

"Did he tell you why he did it?"

"Said he was standing out in front of Bill's Casino on Highway 50, wanting to go down to Carson City where he thought he could get a kitchen job. She stopped at the signal light heading the way he wanted to go. He showed her a thumb. She nodded him into the van. He said by the time they were passing Round Hill she was on him verbally. Worked him over that way, nonstop, and then he noticed the tire iron behind her seat. After about ten more miles of it, he said he couldn't stand any more."

"He grabbed the tire iron."

"And shut her up forever. Guided the van to a stop, shoved her over, sat down behind the wheel, and drove the van onto that side road where a fisherman found it after Nickerson had walked to the highway and hitchhiked back into town. Her bad luck she picked him up."

"Maybe it was inevitable," Farnsworth said, "that she would run into someone with a shorter fuse even than hers and far more dangerous."

"You say you met her—a musician, right?"

"You found a trombone in the van."

"And the other instruments. I've got a list." The sergeant picked up a paper. "The trombone, and a trumpet, bass fiddle, alto saxophone, set of drums, electric keyboard, clarinet."

Farnsworth nodded, understanding everything now. Perhaps there'd been a dead uncle who'd left each behind for her to learn. Switching from an electric keyboard to a piano would have been a small step for her. She'd been so accomplished that she could not only ape to perfection the small mannerisms other great musicians had used but, in fact, ape *everything* they'd done with their individual instruments.

"What was that you said might prove to be of value to me, Caswell?" the detective asked.

"Not a damned thing now, sergeant." The furtive manner had been nothing more than a ruse to help her sell the tape for as much as possible.

That tape, he thought. It was so much easier to understand now how it had been done. She could have rented a professional recording studio complete with an engineer to create the illusion that four different musicians had worked off of one another, back and forth, riff after riff, at the same time.

But the reality was that it

had been the sound of instruments recorded one by one on top of each other. The reason the illusion had been so convincing was that she'd been the whole damned band using music she'd composed. Playing all the instruments, she could decide what each would do before it did it.

The detective's head was wagging now. "We couldn't find a trace of anyone she was related to. She had a little less than five hundred in her wallet. I guess the county's going to have to take care of the rest in order to get her buried."

"I'll take care of the rest," Farnsworth said.

He stood at the foot of the fresh grave with a light breeze cooling his face. He read the words he'd ordered to be carved on the stone:

SAM LOMAX
1967-1994

THE GREATEST JAZZ MUSICIAN
WHO EVER LIVED
(*with the chops to prove it*)

Then, finally, he turned and started back toward his car, hearing in his mind that funky, bright, compelling melody. He should have been cheered by its imagined sound, he thought. But instead it made him feel extraordinarily sad.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Mistaken Fury

by Oswald Couldrey

The Junior Dean was in many respects far from being old fashioned. His philosophical opinions were rather advanced; he played mild golf and cycled; although somewhat of a solitary, he had a keen sense of humor. But he was plagued with a conscience. He did not parade it, or make it an excuse for annoying other people. He was rather ashamed of it, for it was not a sham conscience, but the real thing. He did not even, properly speaking, respect it. It had no plan in his philosophical scheme. He fully recognized its fallibility. He used to watch it cynically from the heights of contemplation and make up epigrams upon it. He used to say that the conscience, to be at all reliable, required as careful a training and as constant a supervision as all the impulses of Original Sin. Nevertheless, he never had the courage to take his conscience in hand in this way. He accepted it at its own valuation, yielded to it, pampered and encouraged it.

He would sit up to the small hours reading through his students' essays because his mind had wandered when they were read out to him (no man on earth could have followed them for more than a page, they were so dull); he knew that neither he nor they would derive the slightest benefit from the dreary penance, but the conscience ordered it. This same conscience used to harry him relentlessly about the way he allotted the punishments of gating, now because he had given too much, now because he had been unduly lenient. A great struggle was even necessary before he was allowed to go on the river on Sundays.

At last the Dean, without seriously facing his affliction, began to nurse a sense of grievance. He took to entering in a book the increasing exactions to which he was subjected, with comments of his own. He found instance after instance of inconsistency and palpable muddling. His conscience was generally wrong, he used to say, on questions of law: he wanted to confute it on a question of fact. But although he was often hard put to it to say precisely on what score his conscience was worrying him on many occasions when it was unduly noisy, he could never nail it down to an actual false accusation.

In the very end of the fall of the year, when Orion first begins to show in the earlier stages of the night, a vague but dreadful hunted feeling came upon the Dean. It was quite unlike the petty uneasiness to which he was used. As he walked or cycled home from his rambles in the country in the early dark of November afternoons, he could fancy he heard, in the shifting of the leaves,

or the ticking of some part of his machine, or the rattle of a match-box in his pocket, the sound of another person following him: footsteps, perhaps the rush of wings. At night, too, he had frightful dreams. That was the beginning of the trouble. Then he noticed the Woman.

He had been reading with his pupils the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, and the first time he saw her, there came over him a strange fancy. A few days after the end of term he was entering the college gates after an afternoon at the library. She stood in the light of a street lamp among the fallen yellow leaves of the elms on the other side of the road. Two days later he passed her a little farther along as he went forth to his reading in the morning, and then for some days repeatedly and at every turn. Even during the lunch hour, when streets are full and the sense of life is strongest, he would catch sight of her behind a packed market cart, it might be, or hustled in the throng of businessmen and shoppers, a low gypsy figure all in black.

He took train for the country and for three hours walked at large on the great chalk downs, which look down from a distance on the city where he lived, downs whose strong free air he had never known fail to drive away the phantoms of the soul, and coming at sundown to a place where the wind sang in a lonely clump of pines, suddenly she rose from beside the track and stood before him. He took off his spectacles and wiped away a mote or two, but the black figure remained, and what he took to be the smile of triumph upon what seemed her face. Even as he looked at her she spoke, in a voice suggesting the ruin of unimaginable old, an extreme, an aeonic senility.

"So you hoped with your chariots of iron and smoke to escape the child of ancient Night," she said.

With a show of dignified annoyance that was very far from being his strongest feeling now, the Dean asked:

"Why are you following me about like this?"

"From the beginning of the world," came the answer, "it has been the prerogative of our sisterhood to track down such as have dyed their hands in parents' blood."

The Dean now realized that his first whimsical fancy had been sober truth. He was haunted by one of the Erinyes.

With the keen but inconsequent perception one has at such moments, he noticed that her brow in the black recesses of her cowl shone as if with sweat. He wondered why. And now he saw upon

her breast, under the lower edges of the hood, a limp coil hanging. Blue and lifeless and cold, it was a serpent's head, a lock of her serpent hair.

Like many men who think much alone, and have lived in the presence of high metaphysical realities, the Dean showed more courage in such a situation than a mere man of affairs might have done.

"But I have done nothing of the kind," he said. "I am a poor, innocuous don, and my father and mother are living quietly together in pleasant Buckinghamshire. I heard from them only this morning."

"The scent of the Bloodhounds of Night does not deceive," she said.

An unutterable sense of guilt swept over him like a vision of hell. And yet his reason could find no cause.

A parent's blood! Perhaps, he reflected, she was speaking generally of crimes between kin and kin, as they do in the Greek tragedians. He had motored lately with friends. Perhaps he had inadvertently run over a relative. Then it occurred to him that the Fury might have made a mistake.

She had an air of extreme decrepitude; perhaps her professional acumen, so to speak, was leaving her. The idea gave him courage.

"In whose blood precisely am I accused of dipping my hands?" he asked.

He looked at them. The only stains he could see were black smudges from the railway carriage.

"You ask me that?" said the Fury; "who should know best of all yourself."

"But I assure you I know nothing whatever about it."

"The word of a murderer counts for little."

Was it of any use to point out that she was begging the question? The Dean reflected that she dated from a period before logic. He asked her helplessly what she was going to do with him.

"I shall haunt you day and night, till the sense of your guiltiness drags you down."

"And then?"

"Then I shall eat you." She smiled again that ghastly smile. To the last her teeth were the one feature of her face which he could clearly discern. There alone was no trace of decay, nor any vagueness of the Chaos. And when he saw the vulpine ridges in full display, he knew that the Fury smiled.

Twilight would soon add its terrors to the loneliness of the downs. It were best to start for home. The Horror followed muttering at the Dean's elbow as he picked his way to the little country station, wondering what the few late wayfarers they met must think of this strange companionship, and why the one railway porter did not seem more surprised, and why the stationmaster did not ask her for her ticket. But as at last they entered the gates of the dark and empty college and the vigilance of the underporter seemed equally at fault, the Dean realized with some relief that his strange visitor was invisible to other eyes than his.

He went at once to his desk and wrote letters to all of his relatives, with some cunning excuse to get an answer by return. The Fury in the meanwhile took possession of his favorite armchair. She sat muttering as she gazed into the red breathing caverns of the fire, as if she read strange oracles of fate there. But when the Dean returned from the letterbox, she was apparently dozing, for the scout had made up a hearty fire and the room was warm. He stole to his bedroom and lay awake fearfully until the small hours, but he heard no more of her that night.

Strange it was, when he rose next morning from uneasy slumbers, to see the smug-faced scout laying out eggs and bacon upon his table, in complete indifference to the grim presence whose skirts he must repeatedly almost have trod upon. In the cold light of the breakfast hour the Dean looked at the horrid thing. There was little sign of life about her now. He could no longer see the yellow eyes, which had been so vaguely terrible in the light of the lamp. Her dress seemed now rather gray than black, and made of some vegetable substance like a monstrous seaweed, hanging in broad ribbons about her sides. Once it must have grown, he thought, among the ooze of some infernal river. It had a rancid smell which was yet not so much loathsome as fraught with some inexpressible terror, the effect of which, even when the Dean had grown to regard his strange companion with something of the contempt of familiarity, never failed to bring a shudder to his frame.

All that day the Fury followed him. At the bank, at the bookshops, she hustled among the unobservant customers. All the afternoon in the medieval gloom of the library her black shadow stood in the corner of the Dean's eye. For the most part her behavior was decorous enough; except that once, when he had gone down on some errand alone into the basement of the building, she came near and looked at him with that fearful smile, and her yellow

eyes aglitter like those of a dog expecting meat. Then he almost fainted in the terror of the dark, and of the hellish steam of her robes and of her viperous hair. But as the day wore on, his courage returned. He received a reassuring wire from his father in reply to an inquiry of the morning. At closing time he went to an hotel bar and drank two whisky and sodas, and returned home determined to argue the case.

He soon found that her behavior in going to sleep on the first night was quite contrary to her habit. The long excursion of the day, and the strong air of the downs, must have tired her. For if by day she appeared comatose and protoplasmic, for the most part she was very lively after set of sun, and there was now again in her wide-open eyes that peculiar greedy sheen, which told the Dean that at all events he must speak now. So he sat down with as much assurance as he could muster in his second-best chair, with his father's wire in his hand, and began.

"Has it ever occurred to you that you may be making a mistake?"

"The Erinyes do not boggle," she replied.

It was not without a shudder that he heard the hideous broken tones for the first time that day. He held out the wire in his hand and asked her to read it.

She looked furtively at the document and shook her head. Then with a mixture of viciousness and self-vindication she hissed out, "When the Fury reads, it is in the hearts of men."

Curious as it may seem, this little fact of the Fury's inability to read made the Dean realize more than anything else with how thoroughly obsolete a creature he had to deal. The generation with which we used to associate illiteracy has hardly passed, and yet the flavor of it carries a more vivid suggestion of antiquity for us than the aeons of the creation.

There was all the superiority of our board-school century in his tone as he explained:

"It is a wire, a telegram, from my father, a message, you know. He is perfectly well."

She answered in her most sepulchral tones.

"They get no messages where your father is, nor none come thence hither."

So it was his father after all, the Dean thought.

"My father," he said, "is paying a visit to Binthorpe, in Lincolnshire. It is out of the way, but its postal facilities are better than you seem to imagine. Now look here. You refuse to take my

word, and you won't believe a wire. What will you believe?"

"Do you deny your crime?" she said.

"My good woman, I have done nothing else from the first. Will you be convinced if I show you my father himself?"

She was sometimes a little deaf. The Dean had to repeat his question. But when she understood, she broke into cracked laughter.

"Assuredly, yes," she said, between her chuckles.

"I think I can manage it," said the Dean. "Will you give me a week?"

"Yes," she answered. "I will give you a week," and she continued to shake with senile hilarity.

The Dean was nettled, in spite of his belief.

"It is a pity you cannot read," he said, in a biting tone. "There is a copy of *Sherlock Holmes* on the side table. A course of it might do you good." And he bounced into his bedroom and slammed the door.

But the night was not to be quite so uneventful as the night before. Presently he heard her snuffling about under the door of his bedroom, and after a while she pushed it open.

He went to the door and expostulated. He said she really must not come into his bedroom. She was very obstinate.

"It is one of our principal duties, sir, to trouble the sleep of our victims," she said, almost pleadingly.

The Dean had occasion to notice more markedly as their acquaintance developed the queer note of respect that sometimes thus mingled with her savage and truculent manner towards him. Though he had never been to the East, he compared it to the attitude of an Oriental towards an Occidental; towards the representative of a civilization which, proud with the consciousness of a transcendent world and history of his own, he despises, but cannot quite understand. Now he thought he might succeed by an appeal to propriety. It had a sufficiently out-of-date flavor, he considered.

"It is positively improper," he said severely.

She said she was old enough to be the great-grandmother of his remotest ancestors. She was refreshingly vain of her antiquity.

He succeeded in persuading her to sleep on the mat, and soon obtained the first good sleep he had had for a week. But in the morning he nearly fell over her in the same spot as he came out of his room to breakfast.

A pile of letters was awaiting him on the table, and not one of them with a black edge. He put them on the fire in a heap unopened.

That day the Dean, to distract his thoughts, spent mostly in the crowded resorts of the town, and took his meals at the cafes. When the luncheon hour violins of one of these establishments struck up he suddenly had the apprehension that the Fury was going to howl, but she merely blinked and fidgeted. Remembering the scene upon the downs, he did not venture to take his usual afternoon recreation at the golf links; otherwise he was hourly losing his horror of the old goddess. He felt sure that at the end of a week he could persuade his father, on some pretext or other, to manage a visit. There was, at any rate, a possible period of his troubles to look forward to. After dinner, and a strong precautionary whisky and soda, it was with quite an air of nonchalance that he took his seat in his own room and faced the visitor, who still, however, occupied his favorite armchair. He took out a cigarette.

"May I smoke?" said he.

There was no answer. The Erinyes watched him curiously and presently gave a cowl-like cough or two. But he refused to take the hint, if hint it was. He had not invited her, he reflected, to sit in his favorite chair.

"I suppose you are really an aggravated form of the conscience," he remarked by way of an opening. "Do you know I sometimes have my doubts about the reliability of the conscience. Don't you think that it sometimes worries one about things that are perfectly justifiable?"

The Dean's object was to force an argument. He thought it might be useful in the present case; but he loved argument for its own sake as an intellectual man should. His friends knew well the studied timidity with which, as now, he would begin to state his case when he wished to lure on a rather reluctant opponent. But the Fury was not to be drawn.

Getting no answer, the Dean continued, "You don't think so? You cannot deny that in the other direction it sometimes overlooks rather important lapses."

Apparently the Fury could not. The Dean had yet to discover that, if he loved discussion, his persecutor loathed it as she loathed all reasons, talk of causes, explanations. Her faith was simple, direct, brutal: a thing was so because it was, and if you did not believe it, you had to be compelled: her mind was of the stage of

the primal hypothesis, the original *fiat* of being beyond which the seeker of cause has ever sought to penetrate in vain.

But the Fury seemed ill at ease now for other reasons. She coughed repeatedly and cast sullen glances, not without apprehension, towards the Dean. The latter's pipe had now been some time alight, and the atmosphere was already laden with smoky wreaths. Evidently she did not like smoke. An enterprising spirit of mischief suddenly entered into the Dean.

He abandoned the attempt at discussion, drew a chair into the middle of the hearthrug, just far enough from the Fury to escape the strange horror with which her close proximity always inspired him—and puffed with all his might. She stuck doggedly to her place. By the end of the third pipe the Dean was feeling decidedly ill, but the Fury was worse. Suddenly she looked at him with a savage indecisiveness, not so strained as her facial menaces generally were but more terrible than any, and the next instant the reek of her was all about him. He puffed wildly a huge cloud in her direction. There was a moment of suspense, and then she turned and fled ignominiously to the other end of the room. The armchair was empty.

Exhausted but victorious, the Dean rose and took possession, holding his pipe as Perseus may have held the magic sword of old. He has that pipe still. "O comfortable briar," he sometimes says to it, with an unconscious Shakespearian echo, as he takes it reverently from its niche, "O comfortable briar, often have you dispelled for me the thronging phantoms of Care and Ennui and unruly Conscience, and the other plagues that assail the mind of man. But the crowning service of them all was when you turned the Fury out of my best armchair."

After this the Dean was more at ease in mind as well as in body. He had too much respect for his enemy's doggedness to try to smoke her out altogether, but he felt that he had a weapon for emergencies. Orestes ought to have smoked a briar, he often says.

However, the Fury huddled on the sofa was more intractable than ever from the social point of view, and by this time the Dean, flushed with his success, was anxious to draw her into conversation. Her reminiscences, he thought, should be interesting. It was not until the second night after the incident of the pipe that his efforts were successful. Bethinking himself of his classic lore, he procured a saucer of milk and set it on the table opposite her. After a while she advanced and lapped it up, and looked at him with a

more amenable expression when she had finished. He felt that he had succeeded.

"You are getting old, Mother," he said to her: "have you never thought of giving up?"

He was about to add, "There are the old age pensions," but feared the joke might grate upon this representative of cosmic Toryism.

There was a moment's pause. She seemed to be reflecting, and when she spoke her voice was almost soft.

"It would be cowardly," she said. "All my sisters have done so, one after another. I feel that I must do the work of them all. After all, we were set to do this work by the changeless statutes of the Night-realm. What is to become of the morals of the world without us?"

He felt a sudden pity for the loneliness of this out-of-date divinity. Ridiculous and futile she may have been, but there was a doglike faithfulness about her that commanded respect.

"There are always the police," he said.

She shrugged her ancient shoulders. She hated the police. Do their work as they might, they were interlopers on her old domain. She once told the Dean that they were continually spoiling her cases by stepping in before the time, and he fancied that what chiefly led her to give him his week's respite was the prospect of at last getting a free run.

"You say your sisters have left you," he said. "Do you know what has become of them?"

"They went away," she said, musing, "one by one. Some of them took a human body, and earned in the world that repose which the immortals are denied. It is long since my dearest friend went thus. Her name on earth was Catherine d'Medici. She was the gentlest of us all."

"I have heard of her," said the Dean, with a nod.

"Yes," she answered, "she made some stir. Tisiphone was with me longest. It is not many years since she went. She is called a suffragette—I think that was the name."

She looked at the Dean suspiciously, wondering why he laughed. After this he used to set out her saucer of milk regularly, and she became as regularly affable.

The Dean has forgotten a great deal of which she spoke. She was least agreeable when she launched into long moral apologies, delivered in a barbaric singsong. Often too, she would utter tirades against former adversaries, or victims, or the wicked generally,

tirades so incoherent that he could only vaguely guess their purport. Sometimes there were strange echoes of the far past.

One evening she pointed to a print of Praxiteles' *Hermes*.

"Where are the Olympians now?" she asked. "I have heard nothing of them for centuries."

"Don't you know?" he said, surprised.

"No," she said, "and I do not very much care. They never had very much to do with us. They are a proud crew, and their morals . . ."

"They are dead," said the Dean.

"What!" she cried. "Zeus, and Poseidon, and Hera, and Pallas—has the old Erinys survived them all?"

"She has," he assured her.

"And Apollo, the glib-tongued brat of Letò?"

The Dean was a lover and connoisseur of poesy. "He lived longer than them all," he said sadly, "but now he, too, is dead."

That pleased her mightily, and she shrieked with laughter.

The one subject upon which she would not talk was the case in hand. The Dean tried to draw her on repeatedly, at the risk, considering their comparatively amiable relations by this time, of want of tact.

"The Furies were wrong in the case of Orestes," he said once.

"No," she said, "he did it, he did it, all the talking of the age cannot alter that."

"You mean you were right on the question of fact, if not on a question of law," said the Dean, remembering his diary of the conscience.

The Fury shied at the technical terms, sniffing a sophistry, and held her tongue.

The Dean remembers very well the night before his father came. They were both very thoughtful; he with a whimsical sadness at the prospect of saying goodbye to the grim antiquity, she with the expectation of developments he knew not how distasteful or otherwise to her Stygian soul. Yet he thought she too was sad.

"Does the idea of eating me still fill you with delight?" he asked her banteringly.

She sighed, a thing that he had never heard her do before.

"My appetite is not what it used to be," she said.

"If my father comes, you will have to retire, madam," he said, in what was intended to be a considerate tone.

She snarled and came near to him, and a terrible look, he could not tell whether of fright or of intense hatred, came for a moment

into her eyes. He never felt her ghastly power so nearly as in that moment.

Of course his father came, rather puzzled as to the reason for his son's strange request, rather anxious on the score of his health. They met the Fury in the street outside the station. She did not follow them, or listen to their talk, or use any effort to make sure the Dean was not playing a trick upon her. But he will never lose the memory of her face as he saw it that last time. He saw gray Despair herself risen out of hell and shown in the light of day.

As they sat at night in the Dean's rooms after dinner, in the hour when the Fury had been used to wake up and to grow most communicative, and while the Dean's father heard something of his story—how a haunting uneasiness had possessed him, and hideous dreams, and general disorder of the nerves, and other such mundane visitations as the don could make serve to express to the brain of common sense his weird experience—he heard through the night a dismal howling that seemed to come from a great distance. It was like the howling of a dog, but more human, for it expressed, not pain, but a great desolation and a great despair. It was not for any vulgar loss of prey, he thinks, that the Fury mourned under the moon that night. It was for the passing of an ancient office, the failure of powers that had been consecrated to their work from the beginning of the world. The instinct of the Erinyes had at last gone wrong upon a question of fact.

The Dean has not troubled himself to continue his jottings relative to the behavior of the conscience. In fact, he could hardly have done so, for he has heard practically nothing more of the pestilent oracle from that time forward.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Margaret Maron's Deborah Knott, the sassy North Carolina judge who debuted in the Edgar Award-winning *Bootlegger's Daughter*, returns for her third case of murder and manners in the Deep South in **Shooting at Loons** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95). A week in a posh coastal town substituting for a sick judge promises easy duty. Deborah will stay in her cousins' empty cabin and stuff herself with fresh seafood. She'll share some bourbon and gossip with a few old friends, soak up some sun, and spend the rest of the time in a rocking chair on the cabin's porch rocking to the lap of the nearby ocean waves. Discovering a body is definitely not in the job description. Neither is the appearance of her first love from New York days nor her uncomfortable position straddling the fence between the oldtimers and the new breed of developers—as Deborah puts it, a choice of “shared shabbiness or holier than thou.” After a week like this, somebody should award this lady judge a real vacation.

Edgar-nominated author R. D. Zimmerman's third suspense “Trance” novel to feature brother and sister team Alex and Maddy Phillips is **Red Trance** (Morrow, \$20), a twisty, nightmarish tale of greed and corruption set in a city turned upside down. Alex Phillips arrives in St. Petersburg where he studied as a student. He catches up on old times with two old friends, and is supposed to do a favor for his blind paraplegic sister: look up Pavel, a Russian hypnotist and colleague with whom Maddy's been corresponding via e-mail. Alex had expected dramatic changes in Russia, but nothing prepared him for what he finds, beginning with a

brutal murder. Told in quick cuts and flashbacks, Alex's story takes him running down a maze of dark alleys and weaving among betrayed trusts to stay alive. It is only Maddy, however, who can lead Alex to the truth. Zimmerman has studied and traveled extensively in Russia, and he has cast the tortured country as a major character. It's a fascinating portrait that will simultaneously fascinate and appall.

Janet L. Smith's third Annie McPherson entry is **A Vintage Murder** (Fawcett, \$20), and it's sure to please. It's been seventeen years since Annie has heard from college friend Tyler North. Once best of friends, the two women disagreed over Tyler's boyfriend, Steven Vick. Tyler refused to believe Annie's accusations against Vick and instead chose him over Annie, marrying him soon afterwards. Now she's placed a frantic call to Annie for legal help. Vick, who turned out to be the abusive husband Annie had predicted, is threatening to take away Tyler's childhood home and her beloved winery. Smith has written a clever fair play murder mystery with an engaging heroine, several memorable characters, and an interesting setting.

Nancy Pickard's newest Jenny Cain novel is **Confession** (Pocket, \$20), a suspenseful tale with an intriguing premise and a lot of emotional bang for the buck. Jenny and Geoff are enjoying the rewards of living alone as a happily married couple when a sulky teenager appears on their doorstep and their perfect world slips out of balance. David Mayer is a lonely and hostile local kid, orphaned the year before by a shocking murder-suicide. Geoff knew David's mother slightly when they both attended the small-town high school in Port Frederick years earlier. But David is claiming that Geoff knew his mom better than that: he believes he is Geoff's son, and he's demanding that Geoff the cop reopen the case of his parents' deaths and clear the man he always called father of his mother's murder. This is powerful stuff, and Jenny's painful position lends a nerve-wracking edge to her amateur investigation.

James Lee Burke won an Edgar for his last novel, and **Dixie City Jam** (Hyperion, \$22.95) should only garner more praise and widen his audience. The setting is again New Orleans and the outlying rural county of New Iberia where Dave Robicheaux is a sheriff who also runs a bait shop and boat rental on land adjoining his home. For fifty years the bodies of German seamen have lain in watery graves near these parts, drowned when their boats were sunk before they could sink American tankers heading into the Gulf waters with the goal of refueling the Allied war effort. Once,

when he was scuba diving in his college days, Dave even discovered a German sub. Suddenly everyone wants Dave to find that sub again—or else. Burke's created a deadly and fascinating antagonist in Will Buchalter, a sadistic neo-Nazi, and a number of teeth-clenching scenes that will demand your full and uninterrupted attention.

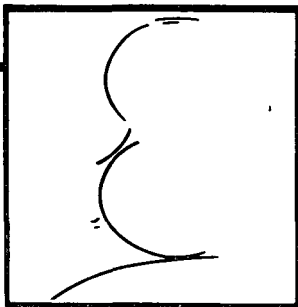
Hugh Holton's **Presumed Dead** (Forge, \$21.95) should appeal to readers searching for a mystery with a twist of the bizarre. Though written by a Chicago cop, there's little about this horrifying journey into the dark secrets of a huge old institution called the National Science and Space Museum to appeal to fans of Joseph Wambaugh. The story opens in Chicago in 1901 and closes—sort of—in 1998. In between, Commander Larry Cole finally learns what really happened to the one hundred eighty-eight people who have mysteriously vanished from the museum over nine decades. I suspect Stephen King's fans will find this more their cup of tea.

William Kotzwinkle's **The Game of Thirty** (Houghton Mifflin, \$21.95) is a thriller with a difference—several differences, in fact. Jimmy McShane is a Manhattan private eye, and his take on things is fresh and his speech breezy. His latest case takes him to Madison Avenue, into the galleries of antiquities dealers, and into the arms (or is it clutches?) of a beautiful and compelling young woman, the daughter of a murdered gallery owner. She introduces McShane to the Game of Thirty, an ancient Egyptian board game once played by the pharaohs. As he plays it, the game begins eerily reflecting the moves he makes in his investigation, as well as predicting the future twists and turns of the case. Kotzwinkle creates a fantasy atmosphere of glamor and magic that contrasts nicely with McShane's down to earth view of life. The result is an entertaining thriller with an honest-to-goodness happy ending.

Albenia "Benni" Harper is the new curator of the folk-art museum at San Celina, a small California town. Since quilts are her specialty, she's eagerly anticipating the opening of the museum's quilt exhibition. Who would ever have thought that the opening would be shadowed by murder? Well, perhaps Benni's grandmother did predict dire events, but Benni has often suffered from proximity to her relatives. Now it looks as if her flaky cousin is a prime suspect, and that perhaps there's also a secret buried regarding Benni's deceased husband Jack. Indeed, there are family lies leading to the heart of the murder. **Fool's Puzzle** by Farlene Fowler has snappy dialogue, a real small-town flavor, and lore for quilt lovers. (Berkley, \$17.95)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Somewhere near the end of *I Love Trouble*, Nick Nolte's newspaper-columnist character Peter Brackett talks about a proposed new novel. "Male, female reporters solve mystery. Fight. Make up," he says.

That pretty much sums up what takes place in this entertaining romantic-comedy thriller that co-stars Julia Roberts as a feisty and talented young newswoman named Sabrina Peterson.

Brackett is a veteran Chicago reporter for the broadsheet *Chronicle* who's at the stage of his career where he'd rather be out promoting his book on a leisurely publicity tour than digging for dirt that may or may not lead to a hot news story.

Peterson, on the other hand, is a hungry rookie columnist

for the rival *Globe*, a tabloid. When she scoops the famous Brackett on what at first looks like a simple trainwreck story, she rubs it in by sending him flowers and a note: "Four days on the job. How am I doing?" This, and a nudge from his unhappy editor, awaken Brackett from his journalistic slumber.

Predictably, the two start out as competitors who can barely stand the sight of each other and wind up as an ever-so-friendly team of investigative reporters whose work might rival that of Woodward and Bernstein. After a narrow escape from death in an elevator, followed by a well-choreographed rooftop dance with a barrage of bullets, the rival reporters realize they're onto something big. They just don't know what it is. To save their necks, the two declare an un-

easy truce and agree to share their information. So they say.

During a hopscotch about the country to follow clues, we learn that the deadly railroad accident is the result of industrial sabotage. Adding to the fun is a tale ripped right from today's headlines.

The company Brackett and Peterson target with their Pulitzer-hunting pens is producing a chemical called LDF, intended to allow cows to produce milk at an earlier age. In real life there's controversy over a bovine growth hormone that proponents say makes it more economical to produce milk. Opponents argue that its long-term side effects are unknown and may be dangerous.

For the most part, the mystery in this film takes a back seat to the old fashioned romantic tension and coy banter between Brackett and Peterson. Filmmakers Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer, who are married to each other, seem to have taken a page from the likes of *His Girl Friday*. Peterson even reminds Brackett, "I'm your competition, I'm not your girl Friday."

In this kind of movie, the main characters are opposites and follow the dictum that opposites attract. Peterson, for example, is constantly stress-

ing her healthy eating habits, which Brackett defies. He's an extra mayo, extra bacon man.

Although our intrepid reporters are investigating a crime—murder, they think—the police curiously remain uninvolved, even when a mysterious assassin targets the two for extermination. No reporter I know would decline to contact the police if someone tried to kill him during the pursuit of a story, but realism obviously isn't a priority here.

Still, this movie works. With her luminous smile and comic ability, Julia Roberts is tailor-made for her role; in another era it could have been played by a Hepburn—Katharine or Audrey. It seems no coincidence that her character's name is Sabrina, the title of one of Audrey Hepburn's great films.

The usually bearish Nolte is actually a bit subdued here, maybe cowed by Roberts' overwhelming presence. But he handles comedy well and looks like a natural in his rumpled trenchcoat. Both Roberts and Nolte shine on the screen.

The supporting cast remains mostly lost in the glare of the film's stars. Harold Ramis, as the slick-haired proprietor of a tacky Las Vegas wedding chapel, is an exception.

THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious Photo-
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ish Columbia, Canada. Hon-
orable mentions go to Wanda
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California; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Can-
ada; John F. Besnard of Irvine, California; Edna Van Leuven of Fallon, Nevada;
James Wilson of Saint Helens, Oregon; A. Giesbrecht of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Can-
ada; Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; Duncan McKelvey of Smyrna, Georgia;
and Robert P. Maguire of Wildwood Crest, New Jersey.

graph contest was won by
ish Columbia, Canada. Hon-
Jones of Tulsa, Oklahoma;
Iowa; Frank B. Regier of Ma-

BENCH PRESS by R. E. Donald

For the third time, Hobbes counted. One. Two. Three. Four. No mistake. This was it.

As instructed, he'd erased the e-mail message after committing it to memory. "Sit on the fourth bench north of the pier. Our operative will be there wearing a hat. At exactly one o'clock, you must say, 'Bitter cold wind.' Our operative will respond, 'Winter's coming.' Pass the operative a cigarette package containing the floppy disk, and you will receive a folded newspaper containing your reward. Our operative will leave immediately. You must walk the other way."

In spite of the cold, Hobbes was sweating profusely. He wouldn't have considered selling his corporation's secret formula to an anonymous competitor if he hadn't needed the money urgently to pay off gambling debts. But there were three people wearing hats on the bench!

Almost one o'clock. Hobbes walked resolutely to the bench and sat at one end. The other three wriggled over to make room.

"Bitter cold wind," he whispered.

"Aye," his neighbor replied, pulling out her cigarettes.

He tried again. "Bitter cold wind."

The man on the far end looked up. "Beg pardon?"

Hobbes' neighbor repeated loudly on his behalf, "Bitter cold wind."

"Winter's coming," the man replied. He grabbed the cigarette package from the woman's hand, dropped his newspaper in her lap, and scurried away.

"Ere!" she said crossly. Hobbes handed her his own cigarettes, took the paper from her hand, and walked quickly in the opposite direction.

Sometimes you win.

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